STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

NOVEMBER 1939

20c

SONS OF THE BEAR-GOD

a Prester John novel by Norvell W. Page

A YEAR AGO HE WAS SET TO BE FIRED

... NOW HE'S RIGHT-HAND-MAN TO THE BOSS!

"YES sir," continued Joe, "his desk used to be right next to mine—now look where he is."

Half proudly and half enviously he and Frank watched Ed as he swung down the company steps, his arm linked in that of J.P., the head of the firm. Ed is getting $7,500 a year now, while Joe at $5,000 is a long way ahead of Frank, a newcomer.

"Boy, he must be plenty smart," said Frank.

"Plenty smart is right," said Joe. "Ed has a lot on the ball, but in spite of that he was slated to go."

"For what?" Frank wanted to know. "A guy like that . . ."

"Well, maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it was his breath . . ."

"Drank a lot, eh?"

"Not Ed. Never a drop, but most of the time he had a case of halitosis* that would knock you down."

"One of those birds, eh? Didn't he read the Listerine Antiseptic ads. Didn't anybody tip him off?"

"Sure, I tipped him off, but not before he almost got the toss. You see, Ed had to see an awful lot of people—close contact stuff. At first they never said anything about it, but later on that breath of his was getting him in bad with his customers. Finally a few of the crustier ones began to write in, complaining, and at last J. P. himself got on to it."

"You'd think J.P. would say something . . . a good man like Ed."

"I understand he did, Frank. Maybe he didn't make it plain enough. Anyhow Ed never took a tumble—and his job hanging in the balance."

"Chump!"

"You said it. But there's hundreds like him; suspecting everybody but themselves."

"Well," demanded Frank, "what happened?"

"I got Ed out one night. After a couple of drinks, to give me courage, I let him have the bad news about that breath of his. Told him he better get going on Listerine and keep it up if he wanted to stay on with the firm."

"You certainly didn't pull your punches."

"I certainly didn't. And boy, was he sore at first. And then grateful. Worked my hand up and down like it was a pump handle. Since then you never saw a guy so careful about the impression he makes on others."

Frank nodded. "The last place I worked, they were plenty fussy about that sort of thing. I think every firm should have a standing order 'Listerine Antiseptic before you call on a customer.' I guess it pays."

"And how! If you think it didn't, just look at Ed; he sure is going places."

Nobody is immune! Everybody probably has halitosis (bad breath) at some time or other without realizing it. That's the insidious thing about this offensive condition. Sometimes halitosis is due to systemic conditions, but usually and fortunately it is caused, say some authorities, by fermentation of tiny food particles in the mouth. Listerine quickly halts such food fermentation and then overcomes the odors it causes. Your breath becomes sweeter, purer, less likely to offend. Always use Listerine before business and social engagements. Lambert Pharmacal Co., *St. Louis, Mo.

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OF THINGS BEYOND

Among the things coming next issue is one that should bring relief to some. The present type face used in Unknown has drawn some complaints as being too condensed for easy reading. Beginning with the December issue we will use a new, sharper type. One result of the coming change, incidentally, has been to somewhat crowd the present issue that we might not have a mixture of new and old type faces. "—And Having Writ—" this issue will, in consequence, be found in the next issue, so to speak. Type is highly inelastic, and it wouldn't squeeze in.

L. Sprague de Camp has the long novel next issue. It is more on the order of his slightly mad "Divide and Rule!" than the grim "None But Lucifer." "Lest Darkness Fall" has to do with one Martin Padway, American archaeologist, who was knocked down by a bolt of lightning. He was knocked down *fourteen hundred years of time,* however. Padway, archaeologist, discovering that his dead and dusty subject was suddenly very much alive, so far as he was concerned, discovers a great lack in his training. Rome, Anno Domini 535, would have been a fine field for Tammany Hall graduates—and Padway introduced a bit of it himself—but an archaeologist had his difficulties.

Then, too, in that issue, is an article by A. M. Phillips, "Time-Travel Happens!" lest you feel too sure, too safe against such flaws in the solid structure of Things As They Are as struck Martin Padway in de Camp's story. For Phillips discusses one of the most extraordinary documents of all time; an example of time-travel so minutely verified, so carefully checked and cross-checked as to be beyond dispute. This article is not fiction; it is an item of the inexplicable and the unbelievable, a thing that Can't Happen—but did.

A thing so incredible as happened to two English schoolteachers one day in the Gardens of Versailles is obviously one to be discounted at first hearing. "If such things can happen," one is too ready to point out, "we'd have heard of it."

Well, friend, the world has; no doubt it has. But ordinarily the world protects itself from such uncertainties—such holes in the fabric of things—as would upset the stability and safety of life, by laughter and the bars of insane asylums. Seldom such things happen to two such stoutly determined, patient researchers as were the two English women who returned from Marie Antoinette's court to report, in the twentieth century, a day from the late eighteenth!

We would recommend that readers peruse first the article "Time-Travel Happens!" that their assurance of the obvious impossibilities be exposed to cracking.

And, of course, there will be a collection of longer and shorter yarns. We vary the theme, not insisting on any—save that life seems, to us, more fun if made slightly less certain, slightly less plotted and known and precisely delineated.

THE EDITOR.

BOY_IT'S GREAT TO FEEL LIKE THIS!

DO YOU "feel like a million bucks"? Does your body tingle with glorious glad-to-be-alive zip, tireless energy—smashing strength and driving power surging through every muscle and sinew?

It's GREAT to feel like THAT! And it's great to have—BEHIND IT—a muscular, perfectly-developed body that others envy and admire. There's a personal magnetism that it seems to "send out" too! It *draws* people to you—wins friends—better jobs—respect. It's hard to beat a man—*in anything*—when he FEELS in the PINK OF CONDITION. And when he has a build which broadcasts that fact to *everyone!*

Untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

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SO often you see Dad and Son helping themselves from the same big red tin of Union Leader. Dad tamping it into his pipe. Son rolling it into crisp, fresh cigarettes.

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Well, they're *both* right! Union Leader *is* packed with flavor—yet tolerant to your tongue. Try a tin today and see how one small dime can bring you today's biggest tobacco value!

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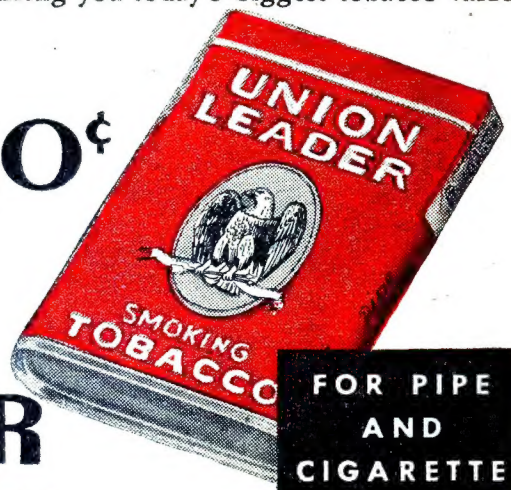

FOR PIPE AND CIGARETTE

UNION LEADER

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

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SONS OF THE BEAR-GOD

By NORVELL W. PAGE

Foreword:

The "mysterious East" has become a cliche upon a thousand travel folders, and at the phrase there arises a vision of slant-eyed Chinese shuffling along a dark and cluttered street—or perhaps the chop-suey signs of Pell Street. But there are greater mysteries than these that a world, too busy with the swift building of slaughterous machines, has never fathomed, and perhaps never will.

There is that strange race of white men living in the Japanese islands—strange men who worship the bear. A stocky,

hirsute people they are, with a European cast of features. These Hairy Ainus, who once occupied the entire Japanese islands, have fought long wars with the present lords and finally have been driven to the northernmost parts of Saghalien and Hokkaido; they have lent, as well, their coloring and their stature to the Ryukyu islands of the south, the Luchu.

No man can say how this purely white race became isolated here in the Far East, but there are certain traces and certain hints. The Luchu say that the founder of their ancient monarchy was a great warrior named Tinsunchi, the "Grandson of Heaven." And there are certain things that point to a migration of a forgotten white race down the River Amur, and into the Gulf of Tartary.

Perhaps this tale would never have been written if I hadn't become interested in the story of Prester John, who was only in his latter days a priest, and in his youth earned, in the gladiatorial games of Alexandria, the name which afterwards rang throughout history—and not for the reason usually given. For Prester John was named for the swift rages of his battles in the arena, named for the hurricane which swept the narrow seas of the Mediterranean and, in the Greek of those days was called the *prester;* Hurricane John—and in the East, his name was changed in the Mongol tongue so that it became Wan Tengri, John of the wind-devils, of the spirits of the high air, the Tengri. It is not a far thing, is it, from John of the High-air, to Grandson of Heaven?

This then is the story of Prester John who, in the first century was driven to wander from Alexandria, "for the sake of his health," as he put it, through strange Hind and the kingdom of Khitai; to the *ordu* of the Mongols and the walls of strange Turgohl; and it deals with his struggles against the magicians who ruled the Tinsunchi, the grandsons of the Heaven-Bear, as they called themselves in those far times; and of that other strange white race, the Ephthalites, the White Huns who had long red hair and roamed the steppes in those vaunting days before history began, and who spoke a European language of the centum group that was called Tokhari—

Go with me, then, to the far slopes of the Yablonoi hills, above sparkling blue Baikul and to the waving grassy sea of Buryat, and learn of the strange things that befell Prester John there.

I.

THE harsh sun of the Buryat dawn prodded among the coverts of fir and cedar with bloody lance-points of light. In the brown forest aisles, they caught the glitter of other lances, man-made and tipped with iron. They struck across the sweat-sheened rumps of shaggy ponies, the yellow greased faces of the horsemen. A great, ragged line of them loped abreast up the swelling slope of the Yablonoi hills, wild-haired raiders of the Kara-korum, of the outlands of Chin—Mongols.

Hoofs beat out a muted rhythm to the vibrant *boom-boom boom-di-boom* of the kettle drums, the clashing of brazen cymbals. Shrill shouts lifted and a brown dust curled up between the columnar trees, sifted among the dark-green needles. Close to the crest of the ridge, the center of the mile-long line slowed while the horns swept forward, galloping, and the drums roared a faster rhythm; there was frenzy in the clangor of the cymbals.

Ahead of the twin horns of the Mongol charge, the forest thinned to a narrow beach of underbrush. Beyond that was the sea of Buryat—a deep sea of plumed and waving grass, brilliant with the blooms of peonies and burning poppies. So high and rank it stood that a man on horseback would seem but half a man adrift in an unseen boat—if any man dared enter the Buryat sea!

The stench of it crawled into the forest beneath the rich warm scent of sunning balsam, and it was dank and rotten and nauseous with death and the threat of death. The ponies caught it with quivering nostrils and pawed the forest mold with unshod hoofs, tossed their heads and snorted. The man sucked it in through broad, flattened noses and they peered for reassurance toward fellow riders and, secretly, they twisted calloused fingers in the protective sign of the Tengri, the wind-devils of the high-

air. But the charge swept forward and nasal, high-pitched calls ran along the forest aisles.

"We have the Red One now!"

"If our good arrows find him not, the spirits of the devil-grass will avenge our blood!"

"Aye! The *daevas* of the grass will strangle the Red One!"

Halfway between the death of the iron-tipped arrows and the death that stank in the devil-grass, the Red One crouched behind a thicket of thorn and swore into the thickness of his fierce fire-red beard. He swore in Greek and Latin and Mongol, and again rapped out a curse in the guttural language of Chin or far-off Egypt.

"Accursed ape-thing," he grumbled at the twisted small man who hunkered down beside him. "Are your monkey hands too feeble to snap off the arrow? Then yank it through my arm, hair and all! Ah, to Ahriman with these treacherous Mongol curs!"

He held out his left arm rigidly and the iron tip of a Mongol arrow, together with half its shaft, stood out from the thews of an arm thick as the thigh of a Mongol pony. His bronzed body was naked to the breechclout and on chest and thigh and shoulder the fiery hairs bristled like individual flames in the sunlight—each with its separate defiance of the hovering death. He set his crouching thighs against the pull of the arrow and his muscles looked like gnarled oak roots thrusting up through forest-mold. The hands of his small companion trembled on the arrow and his pendulous lips quivered. The racing hoofbeats of the charging Mongol ponies were scarce a bowshot away. The drums were hysterical.

"Nay, of what use to draw the arrow, Wan Tengri?" he mumbled. "We are dead men! These Mongols whom you call your blood brothers are behind us—"

"Ahriman's curse upon the treacherous dogs! I hold up empty hands in friendship and they answer me with roaring bowstrings!"

"—and before us," quavered the meager, twisted man, "are the spirits of the devil-grass!"

THE RED GIANT wrenched his arm from the other's fumbling hands. "*Phagh!* You wizards are a sorry lot to fear the magic you make!" His voice rumbled in the tun of his chest. He set his blunt hairy fingers upon the head of the arrow. "I make a magic of my own, with sword and bow, but do I fear them? Ha, not Prester John!" The arrow tore through the flesh and the blood spurted, but his gray eyes bored into the beady gaze of the small wizard. "These Mongols make a magic of sorts, and being sorcerers, will they not dread the devil-grass!"

The small wizard shivered and backed as far away as the cover of the thorn bush would permit. His dirty clothing was in rags and on his ridged skull the sweat had plastered his mouse-colored hair flat.

"Nay!" he protested shrilly. "I fled Turgohl with thee! I dared and helped thee slay my fellow wizards, but I will not enter the devil-grass!"

"Then die here!" Wan Tengri laughed. "As for me, it matters not whether it be Mongol iron or devil's spells. Nay, I have bested a few devils in my time, and I would rather face those than a Mongol charge! Here, my dagger, Bourtai."

The wizard, Bourtai, took the dagger in crooked, trembling fingers. "Better to die here, mercifully, under the arrows of the Mongols!" he moaned. "Even the animal trails turn back from the edge of the devil grass!"

Wan Tengri snatched a handful of grass and ground it into his bleeding wound. "Why then, small animal, find your burrow and dig into it!" he grinned. "As for me, I shall slit a few Mongol

bellies to sharpen my steel—and then try it out on the grass-devils! Away with you, Bourtai, and make your peace with the spirits of the sea of Buryat. Mayhap they will welcome you as a fellow dark creature of evil, small twisted soulless thing!"

Wan Tengri flung back his fiery head and leaped erect behind the thorn bush, and his laughter strained roughly at his throat. "Ho, thou sons of noseless mothers!" he boomed at the Mongols. "Ho, thou lumps of offal! Dung of a humpless camel! Come and meet thy death, at the hands of a better man! The arrows of Prester John are thirsty!"

He bent his great bow of horn and wood and sinew, strung with tiger-gut from a beast his own hands had slain. It was twice the size of the Mongol bows, better suited to the might of the broad shoulders of Prester John, who in the Mongol tongue was Wan Tengri. The muscles of his back writhed like serpents, and his first long arrow snored through the air.

A Mongol rider shouted shrilly and dodged behind the neck of his horse, but Wan Tengri had sped his arrow with shrewd foreknowledge of that trick. Through bone and gristle of the horse, the arrow gouged until only its hair-tufted butt remained to flirt in the wind, but its iron point was buried in the breast of the man, so that dying scream of horse and man rose thinly together in the harsh light of the dawn sun.

"Howl sweet, Mongol dog!" shouted Wan Tengri, with great laughter. "Methinks thy horse has the better voice!"

Two heartbeats apart sped the great war arrows and Wan Tengri's mocking battle laughter sounded deeply above the thunder of charging hoofs. The answering, slighter arrows of the Mongols hummed toward him, but he was never still for longer than the instant it took to snap a bowstring. He was a dancing target, a lithe living thing of bronze that slew and laughed and slew again. He plucked a requiem on that single string, and its bass note wrung screams from the horsemen. Four more saddles were emptied, then the whistle of Mongol arrows was suddenly still, and Wan Tengri pivoted, wary as a cat, to learn the reason.

Close behind him, two Mongols charged side by side, and their lances reached hungrily for his broad chest! No time to notch an arrow to the great bow. It flew from Wan Tengri's hands and he leaped mighty, cleared the thorn bush in a single reaching stride, and as he hurtled through the air, his hand snugged about the comforting heavy hilt of his long curved sword. It whined hungrily from its sheath—but the lances came after him. The Mongol horses reared high with blood in their flaring nostrils, sharp, small forefeet striking. Past their necks, he could see the bitter glisten of the spearmen's eyes above high, greased cheekbones, squat faces beneath high conical hats of felt. And Wan Tengri's teeth showed white and mocking through the thicket of his red beard, and the sword, hissing from its sheath, whirled in his hand and struck in the same movement.

The point sheared from a lance and cut its glittering arc through the air; the blunted staff reached past Wan Tengri's shoulder. His left hand clamped home upon the second lance, thrust it past his side with a savage wrench, and his sword was reaching forward. Its keen, curved edge caressed an outstretched arm—and the arm had no more hand. The rider screamed and fled, and Wan Tengri leaped across the thorn bush while the second cursing Mongol whirled his rearing mount, and tugged at his short, curved sword!

"Nay, leave it in its sheath, Mongol," Wan Tengri mocked him. "It will do you no good!"

His left hand slipped up to knot in the pony's mane. And Wan Tengri

vaulted toward the saddle with his sword-point sweeping before him! The Mongol's blade leaped clear, and a cry, high and voiceless with despair, tore from his throat. Even as he flashed the short sword high to strike, the curve of Wan Tengri's blade caught beneath his chin; and the shock of Wan Tengri's vault drove his body from the saddle. But the scream died in mid-note, and when the Mongol struck earth, his head rolled separately on the gray earth.

Wan Tengri shouted, and his sword whipped downward to catch the head and send it flying into the faces of the Mongol charge.

"Credit a score for me, thou camels!" he shouted. "Surely, now, I am the best player of poh-lo among you!"

Once more he stooped as he drove the pony hard toward the devil-grass and rose with bow in his hand, and afterward his arrows snored again. Wan Tengri's long legs scorned the stirrups and his skin-clad feet tore through the thorn bush. He rolled his head with its blazing hair, from side to side, and shouted while he sped death among the Mongols—Colossus astride a horse. The blood dabbling his arm and side were incongruous, as if this fighting man of bronze and flame were more than human, as if death itself must turn aside its swift sword from his resistant flesh.

Wan Tengri swung a hand high in salute and his lips twisted in a mocking smile. *"Ave!"* he cried. *"Ave et vale!"* Many times in the arena at Alexandria, half across the world from here, he had cried so to the waiting crowds, to shrinking foes, *"Hail and farewell!"* But it had been "Hail" for Wan Tengri, and "Farewell" for many, many others, and so the bloodthirsty Alexandrian crowds had given him the name which Mongols translated into their own tongue, and with respect. For the hurricane of their narrow seas, the Alexandrians had named him, for the lightning-slashing black *prester* that could smash their swift galleys to matchwood: named him Prester John for his word that struck like lightning, and for his furious battle rages that nothing could check. And to the Mongols, he was John of the Wind-Devils: Wan Tengri!

Like a hurricane, he had burst the Mongol charge and now he raced toward the doubtful safety of this enchanted sea of grass, and ahead of him small Bourtai leaped high in desperate flight, his back-staring face loose with terror. Stooping to drive his great fist into the collar of Bourtai's rags, Wan Tengri stared beyond where the lush rank greenness of the devil-grass waited, waving small deceitful arms in invitation. Above the salt sweetness of his own salt blood, Wan Tengri could sense the solid tentacles of the grass-stench reach out to wrap about him, and the defiance of his final, *"Ave et vale!"* was half of the mystery and the menace that waited there.

Bodily, he lifted small Bourtai with his great fist so that he boosted the wizard along in great, soaring bounds and Bourtai's voice wailed high, chanting a litany of gods and devils, beseeching now the Tengri, now the cruel altars of Ahriman, and at last the new god whom Wan Tengri worshiped: Christos. Wan Tengri laughed and heard the thud of arrow into flesh, felt the start of muscles between his knees as iron struck to the vitals of his horse. Wan Tengri leaped clear, landed running, and still he boosted Bourtai along so that his flailing feet scarcly touched the earth.

"Up, mighty warrior!" Wan Tengri bellowed. "Cover the earth with thy magic, ten-cubit strides! Mutter thy prayers to the devils of the Buryat grass! It is time!"

It was time and Wan Tengri's eyes were cold and wary upon the lushness of the grass. The guttering whine of Mongol arrows was all about him, plucking past to flick out of sight in the green

wall ahead. A poppy head leaped high under the slash of an iron tip and dropped limply. The grass threshed and wavered like a suffering, living thing—and pain slashed through Wan Tengri's right calf. An arrow—

Wan Tengri stumbled and a curse sprang to his lips. With a rolling heave of his shoulders, he flung Bourtai in a high, sprawling curve toward the grass. Legs and arms clawed at the thinness of air and a scream lifted—and the grass swallowed Bourtai. One more great stride Wan Tengri took and then he bounded high as if he leaped a Roman fosse. His feet just cleared the green spearpoints at the edge of the sea. For an instant, his gaze stabbed ahead and as far as the eye could reach, there was only the waving swaying grass, the brilliant splotches of bloom. Then ropelike threads whipped about his ankles and snapped; trailing edges slashed his flesh like miniature swords. The green sea rushed up about him, closed over his head. His thin-booted feet plunged deep into the slimy cold of the earth and he pitched forward.

Wrist-deep, his hands plunged into the ground. His fingers tore the wiry fiber of roots, cutting and snake cold, and the strench of decay eddied up to clog his nostrils. He pushed to his feet, swearing, dragging muddy palms across his thighs, feeling the pull of the iron in his leg muscles as he flung toward where Bourtai had fallen. Bourtai was huddled on his knees and muddy hands were clapsed about his ridged skull.

"Up, monkey-face," Wan Tangri growled, but not urgently. "Your grass-devils will be here as well as deeper into this stink-hole—and farther on, the Mongol arrows cannot reach!"

He dragged Bourtai up and limped as he pushed on, shouldering a way between the close reeds with their waiting, dangling knife blades. A Mongol lance slatted past and buried half its length in the muck; arrows rustled like snakes but there was no crash of Mongol ponies charging into the sea. Their higher shouting, the mounting fury of the drums told him the charge had checked. Grimly, Wan Tengri pressed on, stepping on the grass-clumps where thick roots made firmer footing. His belly writhed with the stench, and Bourtai cringed against his side. Overhead, the dawn-wind was stirring and little waves of movement ran through the grass with a harsh, metallic whispering. His feet made wet, sucking sounds.

"Come, thou lion of valor," he grumbled at Bourtai. "Come, my prince among wizards. You have called enough gods to guard us through ten thousand seas of Buryat! Now weave us a spell or two to confound these Mongols before they think to set fire to our sea! Come, you have time enough and courage enough to weave a spell, eh, thou tiger among men?"

Bourtai's head twisted up and his eyes were venomous as a snake's. The dagger in his fist had its point turned outward—toward Wan Tengri's belly! Bourtai said nothing at all, but his yellow teeth showed under a shrinking lip and Wan Tengri moved a pace away, his hand near the hilt of the sword that curved nakedly against his thigh. He grinned warily, teeth flashing through the thicket of his red beard.

"So my apeling shows his teeth?" he said softly. "Mayhap I saved thy worthless and filthy neck to slit with my own steel!"

"See to thy own!" Bourtai whispered. "You are free with your insults, barbarian! There is a certain ape that has the fangs of a serpent!"

Through the time a high-shot arrow might take to reach its mark, the two men stared into each other's eyes, and there was no wavering in either. Presently though, Bourtai nodded as if what he saw satisfied him, and he turned his back upon Wan Tengri and crouched to draw certain needful things from the re-

cesses of his rags. Wan Tengri's smile widened, and there was laughter in his gray eyes—laughter and affection. Now Bourtai was himself again!

WAN TENGRI turned warily and everywhere the close-pressing green walls blocked his vision. The slim reeds pressed cold against his thighs and back, swayed aside to his advance and pressed close again. Truly, a very abode of devils! Scowling, Wan Tengri stooped to free the arrow from his leg. His left arm was stiffening and he became aware of the close heat of their covert, of the cloud of stinging gnats dancing before his eyes, clustering about his wounds. He swore and daubed mud upon calf and arm, dried his hands on grass before he wrung the sweat from his beard. The sun was higher now. The heat struck straight down.

Above the rustle of the grass, the wailing minor chant of Bourtai's incantations was scarcely audible and Wan Tengri only half listened, his ears probing for danger in the fastness about him. His hand moved to the bit of the True Cross about his throat. *Phagh!* What had he, a follower of Christos, to fear from devils? Had he not prevailed over all the wizards of Turgohl—with, of course, the help of his good sword and his own good brain—all the wizards of Turgohl save only one?

For a moment, he thought longingly of far Turgohl with its towers tipped in flame of gold. He had been master there for a day, and if he had taken the princess to wife— But she had been a grasping, waspish piece. He was well rid of her, though; by her magic, she had stripped him of jewels and gold, and even of clothing, and her spells and her horsemen had harried him from the shores of bright, blue Baikul.

There was no turning back, not to Turgohl where the shrewish princess waited with her vengeful spells; not to the Mongol tribes turned suddenly hostile where once they had broken the arrow in blood brotherhood; nor to Chin where he had stolen the favorite concubine of the Dragon Emperor of Khitai; nor to Hind or even Egypt. There, too, the air was unhealthy—for Prester John!

Prester John chuckled in his beard. There was no way for him but forward. Yet how else should a soldier and a conqueror move? It was well. Somewhere, he would find the city and the empire he would carve from these heathen wilds, and there would be riches and princesses, less waspish than she of Turgohl. He could send his golden tribute back to the altars of Christos—retaining, of course, his own proper share.

"Hurry with thy spells, Bourtai," Wan Tengri grumbled impatiently. "The devils of the grass are waiting for us and Prester John is not a man to disappoint even a demon when he wants battle."

Bourtai's voice came petulantly, "Other wizards fight my spells. I can smell them in the air."

"'Tis thy own small goat-stink, wizard," Wan Tengri growled. "To Ahriman with thy spells! The Mongols could have burned us long ago, and—Ah! Is this thy spell, Bourtai?"

As he spoke, darkness clustered above the tops of the grass and pressed down upon Wan Tengri's head, a darkness like dry, black fog, and through it Bourtai's voice came more strongly, taunting.

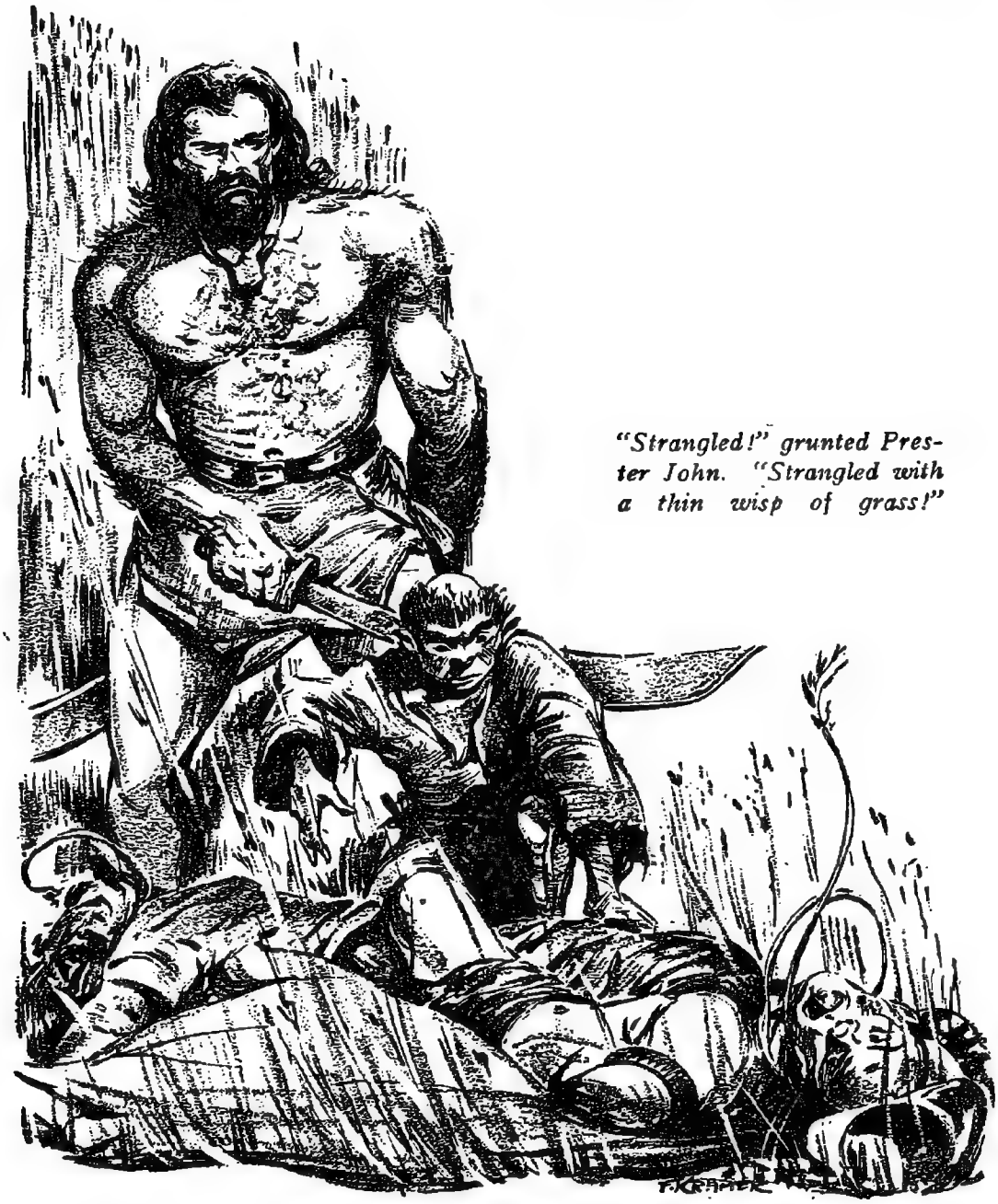
"Flee, Mongols!" he howled. "Flee from the spirits of the devil-grass! Flee before the Great Bear of Heaven devours you!"

Wan Tengri swore and his fingers pressed the bit of the True Cross against his flesh—and his sword whined from its sheath. A high wall lifted from the distant shore where the Mongols lay in wait, and afterward the hard, fast pounding of horse's hoofs, dwindling into the

distance, laboring up the slopes of the Yablonoi and pelting down again toward the desert of the Black Sands, toward Kara-Korum where they were at home. And Bourtai giggled in the darkness beside Wan Tengri.

"I could slit thy belly wide now, thou hulk!" he whispered. "Mock my spells, will you?"

"'Ware my sword's edge," Wan Tengri rasped into the darkness. "It hath eyes, and it has drunk only lightly



"Strangled!" grunted Prester John. "Strangled with a thin wisp of grass!"

today! Lift this accursed fog of thine lest the devils come on us unaware!" His hand shot into the darkness and grasped the stringy neck of Bourtai, dragged him close under the crushing power of his hand.

"Nay, Wan Tengri," Bourtai whined, "My spells are too strong to be broken in an instant. Let us hasten back to the friendly hills. The Mongols will not return, for the Heaven-Bear hounds them to the very doors of the khan's *yurt*. And I like not this grass. I tell you that I smell devils!"

"I have sniffed better smells. Wan Tengri agreed cheerfully. "Yet there is no safety in the hills for us. The Mongols will return, and the horsemen of the yellow witch of Turgohl. And behind them are the wizards of Kasimer and the sword-bladed lances of the men of Chin. So it is forward, small Bourtai, before my wounds stiffen and the fever rots my bones."

Bourtai's voice was a whisper. "But the spirits of the devil-grass, master! They are near. My wizard's bones feel them near!"

Wan Tengri made a low rumbling sound in his throat, but no other answer. Bourtai could make the hair lift on his neck like a wolf's, and in truth there was a certain *feel* to the air. *Phagh!* It was the miasma of the fen.

"Back to thy safe shores then, monkey-face," he growled. "Prester John goes forward and, as for devils—never yet have I found a throat my good steel could not slit!"

He took a long, slow stride forward and another and Bourtai yelped and scuttled to his side and thereafter bounded, whimpering, from grass-tuft to grass-tuft as Wan Tengri stalked on, deeper into the sea of Buryat, into the metallic whispering of the grass where the very earth opened wet mouths to drag back his feet. The gnats drank his sweat. As he strode, the dry fog thinned and the heat of the sun came through. The crawling pain of his wounds nagged at him, but his solid lips made a stubborn line and a scowl sat on his forehead. Bourtai chattered at his side, or skipped ahead, moving sidewise like a crab, to peer up into the fiercely bearded face of Wan Tengri.

"Master, they say that the sea of Buryat stretches to the edge of the world. They say that unspeakable monsters live there and wait to topple the unwary off into space. The Heaven-Bear and the Serpent who supports the earth live in wait! There is only death ahead, master, even if we escape the spirits of the devil-grass. Perhaps, we should turn back, master."

Wan Tengri spat with dry lips. "In Egypt, they told me the edge of the world was beyond Java, and in Java, they said beyond Chin, and in Chin they said the great sea beyond Nippon poured into the cavern beneath the earth. Now I have been to those places and always the edge of the earth was beyond. And beyond this Buryat sea of thine, apeling, we will find people who will say the edge of the world is farther on."

"Thou knowest, master," Bourtai spoke humbly, but with a curious light in his black eyes. "Yet, there are the spirits of the devil-grass!"

Wan Tengri laughed shortly. "They strangle the unwary, eh, monkey-face? Well, it takes a time to die of strangling, unless—unless they have the skill of those Tuggees of the Hind who know a certain skillful twist that snaps the spine! Nay, but that is not strangling, and in the time it takes to die so, a man may do things with his good sword!"

"Yet will I make a spell or two, Bourtai muttered. He scuttled a short spear-cast ahead, dagger in his fist and Wan Tengri saw him stiffen to his full height and throw both hands high above his head and begin to struggle. Nay, he danced on air, struggling, and he uttered

no sound at all but both his hands tore presently at his throat!

II.

THE ROAR of anger, of challenge, that burst from Wan Tengri's throat was the fury of a wounded tiger. There was a thin shriek as his sword leaped from its sheath and he was bounding forward through the thicket of the grass. If there was fear in his belly for these grass-devils, it was transmuted to rage. His teeth flashed fiercely in the covert of his beard.

Three great strides took him to where Bourtai struggled and sagged toward the fluid earth, but Wan Tengri did not pause. His left arm clamped about Bourtai's thin, ragged body as he leaped past and twice more he bounded forward before he dropped the limp body and whirled on guard. About him, nothing moved save for the hiss and whisper of the wind-blown grass, the rattle of the reeds shivering from his passage. He whipped his eyes down to Bourtai. His face was tinged with the blue of strangulation, his eyes goggled and his tongue thrust out—but there was nothing at all about his throat!

"Christos!" Wan Tengri whispered. "These are powerful devils!"

He stooped and with the pressure of his hand compressed Bourtai's chest, released it and thrust again. Bourtai's head rolled. He swallowed dryly.

"Ha!" Wan Tengri shouted. He straightened, to strain his eyes at the thin green walls about him. Reeds behind reeds and between reeds; little corridors that pinched off just when the eye was beginning to reach. Movement—by Ahriman, there was movement everywhere! With a hoarse shout, Wan Tengri leaped forward. His sword slashed and thrust at the greenness as if it were a human, living foe. He sprang aside, cut again. From a thick clump, a little patch of fog leaped toward his face, but Wan Tengri was moving too fast to feel more than a trailing wetness across his shoulder as it went past him. His throat swelled and a shout he tried to force out would not come! He coughed thickly, but charged on.

Wan Tengri leaped at the reed clump and his sword ate into it, through it, and there was nothing there. He laid the grass in swathes like sickled grain and hacked on in a wide circle about the feebly stirring Bourtai. Another patch of fog—Wan Tengri sprang past it with a lifting cry of challenge in his throat and, like an echo of it, a wailing cry soared from the thick greenness ahead. It was a thin and piercing cry that stabbed like pain through the skull and it faded upward until Wan Tengri could hear it no longer, and still his eardrums ached with the sound.

For a space of heartbeats, Wan Tengri stood transfixed and a touch of coldness ran along his spine. He was hearing it now, hearing the very voice of the grass-devils! With a furious oath, Wan Tengri hurled himself toward the spot from which the sound had lifted, and once more he found nothingness. He thought that it might be a lure to drag him from Bourtai's feeble side and he whirled and raced back. But Bourtai still lay there, stirring weakly, and Wan Tengri widened the circle of safety about them, cut reeds with his valiant sword until the sweat made rivulets down his sides, until his whole body glistened.

This was no madness, no thoughtless fury. If there were human enemies near, he wanted the sight of them, clear before his rage-injected eyes. He would see then what the bow and steel of Prester John could do! If they were devils—why, they must have some shape for a man to grasp!

WAN TENGRI paused at last in the middle of the clearing he had made. His sword was wet with juices and he

dragged it across his thigh, while his deep breathing snorted out through widened nostrils. His eyes combed fiercely about and he threw words like stones at Bourtai.

"What was done to thee, small one?" he asked roughly. "Who struck thee down and strangled thee without rope?"

Bourtai's voice was a hoarse croak, "Nay, master," he whispered. "I cannot say. Something like a handful of fog—struck across my face. It smelled. And afterward, I could not breathe! Enchantment, master; the spells of the spirits of Buryat!"

"Ah! To Shitan with them! Let them come out and fight!" Wan Tengri lifted the glitter of his sword-blade and his arm quivered with the eagerness of his muscles. "Come, you skulking devils! Throw your demon's fog at me!"

His voice rang off flatly into the empty distances and there was no answer at all, not even the high lift of that thin, hurting wail, though he waited long. Presently, his sword arm dropped like a loosened beam and a stubborn set came to the breadth of his shoulders, pulled his fiery head stiffly forward.

"Can you walk, comrade?" he asked thickly.

"Let us rest here a while, O Wan Tengri," Bourtai quavered.

Wan Tengri's nostrils sucked wide, "Then will I carry you, small parcel," he said, and his voice deepened. "Here are devils who will not come to battle with Prester John. Needs must, I go to them!"

Bourtai wailed, but Wan Tengri lifted him with a quick surge of loin and back, set the small wizard upon his left shoulder. "Now then," he said grimly, "do you keep watch. If any small patch of fog raise its head, why—spit at it!"

Bourtai's hand trembled where it twisted in Wan Tengri's hair. "There is a small clearing ahead, master," he croaked. "A clearing in which two men might lie side by side, and I think two men lie there, for I see the white peak of a Mongol's hat, and the yellow and black of another who wears a tiger's hide!"

Wan Tengri eased him to the earth, "Yet I thought that Mongols feared these devils!"

"I think, master, that they do well," whispered Bourtai. "I think this man should have feared them, too. I think that he and his fellow are dead!"

Wan Tengri stood rock-still, listening to the hammering of his heart and the monotonous whine of the wind. Presently he crept toward the spot that Bourtai had pointed to and now, by stealth, he lifted his feet soundlessly from the suck of the mud, and no reed cracked under his tread. He wriggled his great body between the slim bodies of the grass and their leaves scarce made a rustle so that, in a little while, he stood on the verge of the clearing that Bourtai had seen and a widenéss stretched his eyes and a quiver ran through all his tensely, waiting body. He stood so long that he was aware Bourtai had moved to his side and, afterward, they both stared at what was in the clearing. It was as Bourtai had said. There was a Mongol here and his fellow wore the tawny, striped hide of a tiger. His fellow *was* a tiger, and the beast's mask, like the man's face, showed the distortion, the popping eyes and outthrust tongue of those who die by strangulation. About the throat of each was twisted a single, feeble blade of grass! Just one blade of grass, yet a fierce warrior and a fiercer beast lay dead!

The reeds seemed to creep nearer while Wan Tengri stood at gaze. Even the ceaseless breeze had died, and there was no sound at all save the rasping thrust of his own breath and, presently, the babbled incantations of Bourtai. There was peril here, crawling secretly. Man and beast were freshly dead, and the Mongol was one of those who had

fought upon the shore behind. The spirits of the devil-grass had slaughtered them and carried them here as a warning, or perhaps as a trap! Wan Tengri's head lifted and his nostrils arched. There was only the fen stench. Wan Tengri rolled his shoulders, and forced laughter into his throat.

"I take this kindly of the grass-devils," he rumbled. "Here is a cloak that I need and other clothing that will fit thee, if not my girth, Bourtai. As for this tiger, there is a hide a man could use, and fresh gut for my bow. Up, Bourtai, off thy wizard's bones, and give appropriate thanks for this offering from the grass-devils, to John, whom the wind-devils sired!"

Nevertheless, it was only slowly that Wan Tengri moved forward into the clearing where two creatures, recently living, lay dead with no more than a thread of grass about their throats to choke out the furious life.

"Master," whispered Bourtai, "it is their warning. If we go now, they will relent!"

But Wan Tengri was smiling and his answer came cheerily, "Why, as to that, there is death behind as well as ahead, and at least what lies ahead will be new! There must be wealth there since the grass-devils defend it so well, and wherever there is wealth, our thieving fingers should stick to some little share of it! So, pick up thy courage, and thy buttocks, my wizard-thief, and do thy share of taking this loot that the grass-devils donate!"

So Wan Tengri bent to his task on the carcass of the tiger and at first Bourtai jabbered out his fears in his cackling, complaining monkey voice. Presently, he bent over the Mongol and began to strip off his clothing and weapons. Heat closed in upon them and the direct glare of the overhead sun and the day wheeled on to mid-day. The blood-stench of the tiger brought a myriad flies and ants and small armored crayfish crawled out of the reeds and vultures that began to swing against the brassy sky, dropped lower, lower. But of the grass-devils there was no sign at all, as if an armistice had been declared here in this clearing in the grass. An armistice, but no peace.

Wan Tengri kept stubbornly at his work while the sweat broke the dam of his thick brows and blinded him—and the hours sped. His hands and thick forearms were slimed. And he kept on—and after a long while flung the tiger's hide across the tops of the yielding reeds to stiffen in the sun, and used the keen edge of his dagger to cleanse himself. Still there was brooding in the down-drawn line of his brows. It gave way at length to a hint of a grin, and he began to hum vibrantly through his nose. Bourtai gazed at him with bright unblinking eyes and sidled closer.

"The wind-devils have told thee a hidden thing, master." His voice insinuated a question. "Do they tell you where we find safety?"

Wan Tengri snorted his laughter. "Why, small wizard, at the edge of the world!" He caught up the Mongol's lance and snapped its stout shaft with his two hands, squatted and, laying across it two arrows from which he removed the tips, he used tiger sinew to bind them into a framework. Bourtai rocked on his hunkers, working bare toes in the muck.

"And will there be—wealth at the edge of the world, master?"

Wan Tengri made his brows scowl, while laughter lurked in his eyes. "Call in thy own weak godlings for prophecy, ape-face. Mine have told me what they have, and you will learn of it when I tell you. And yet—" He paused and his gray eyes looked straight into the westerning orb of the sun. "Two hours till dark. This I will tell thee, wizard. An astrologer in far Byzantium foretold all this. I shall win three king-

doms and before me, at last, shall march ten crosses of gold and jewels and behind each shall follow ten thousand horsemen and a hundred thousand men-at-arms! My name and my seed shall outlive a hundred-hundred years!"

Bourtai showed his yellowed teeth in a skeptic grin. "Myself am more interested in tomorrow, thou wind-devil, and the filling of my belly!"

Wan Tengri asked softly, "Then you doubt my prophecy, thou small lump of monkey-dung?"

Bourtai's gaze did not leave his and the line of his lips tightened. "Nay, great one, have I not seen one of these kingdoms of thine? Kingdom for a day! I only speculate, Wan Tengri, on the precedence of these ten times ten thousand men. Do they march before thee? Or do they gallop on thy trail to separate that great red empty head of thine from thy shoulders?"

Wan Tengri swore and his mighty hand snatched for Bourtai—but found only empty air. Bourtai had the Mongol's dagger in his fist.

"It is only that I remember, Wan Tengri," Bourtai said, still softly, "the men of Egypt and the Hind and Khitai and Turgohl who trail thee. And these wind-devils of thine have lately whispered to me a new thing also. There are marching, armored men nearby! They are within the sea of Buryat, and perhaps they come to bolster the strength of the grass-devils, quiet this long while —or perhaps it is only one of thy kingdoms come to claim thee!"

Wan Tengri straightened his corded thighs and was on his feet, listening. "You accursed wizards can never say a thing straight out. How long since did you hear these marching men?"

Bourtai showed his rat's teeth and did not answer, but his long, crooked toes continued to work in the mud. Wan Tengri eyed him steadily and his straining ears caught no sound. Abruptly, he grinned. He whipped out his sword and drove it point down until it met solid earth, then bent to clamp the blade between his teeth. His eyes closed and his breathing, for the moment, stilled. Faintly, the vibration came to him as regular as signaling drumbeats, felt rather than heard on the still air of evening. Marching men, whose heavy feet kept rhythm. It was a sound the whole world knew and dreaded, marching men, soldiers in armor, who brought war and death.

Wan Tengri straightened and wiped the sword clean on cold, stiff Mongol flesh, and he paid no heed to the thing he did. "I think you are right, Bourtai," he said softly. "It is one of my kingdoms come to claim me. The kingdom of the grass-devils!" His laughter was a faint rumbling in his chest, and he whipped the drying tiger hide from its bed of reeds and began to bind it, with sinew and a pricking dagger point, to the framework he had built. "This is a magic shield, wizard," he said. "With it, I turn the enchantments of the grass-devils back upon themselves. For look you, they cannot twice strangle the tiger!"

"No need," Bourtai grumbled, yet his eyes were keen with interest.

"Behind this," Wan Tengri went on, steadily, "you will be safe from the little handful of fog that stinks and closes thy nostrils. From behind it, you will work your enchantments, and perhaps speed an arrow or two from the Mongol's bow!"

"But . thou, master?"

Wan Tengai threw back his head and laughed, and it was such laughter as brought cheers in the Circus at Alexandria,

"Phagh!" said Wan Tengri. "The wind-devils will drink up this handful of fog, and grow stronger! We will march to meet this kingdom of mine, Bourtai, for I like solid ground beneath my feet, such earth as those men stride

upon. When I tell thee, start another of these black fogs of thine, Bourtai." He scowled fiercely, yet his eyes were kind. "See to it, ape-face, you keep behind the magic shield!"

Bourtai answered and his humility held no mockery. "I have seen thy magic, Wan Tengri. Did it not conquer mine in Turgohl? Mine and that of six other great wizards of Kasimer?"

Wan Tengri was striding forward through the reeds. He held to a straight line and his shoulders, from which the Mongol's cloak of white felt swung now, moved with a stiffened readiness and his head, under the Mongol's conical white hat, was thrust forward in challenge. Bourtai chattered behind him, and carried the shield of wet tiger hide in both reverent hands above his head. Wan Tengri hoped grimly that the tiger shield would turn aside the death-fog of the grass-devils. What was more important, was that it would give Bourtai the courage to work his small magics. The darkness of the fog would hide him from the approaching enemy, and confuse them. It would not hamper Wan Tengri, for he was but one man—and any other man he struck would be an enemy.

Softly, Wan Tengri began to hum through his nose and Bourtai's wry face twisted into a grin. When the master was happy, things went well. It was true that Wan Tengri had borne nothing away from Turgohl because of a small squeamishness against cutting the throat of the yellow-haired witch, but even so he was the greatest warrior whom Bourtai had ever known, and he had known the champions of the Chin, from Kasimer, the roof of the world, and from far Hind.

Bourtai whispered, "My master is happy. My own heart is glad."

Wan Tengri did not hear him, for his ears were focused forward to catch the first whisper of the tread of marching men; and his thoughts were there, too. He must not kill all these men. It was plain that they worshiped magic, and one man's conquest over a company must be translated as magic in their feeble brains. Wan Tengri's solid lips spread and his hand struck with affection the hilt of his good sword of Damascus. Well, it was a magic Wan Tengri could understand, and use! They should take him back to their city humbly, as befitted the retinue of a famous wizard!

Afterward, of course, he would have to fight their wizards, but that was a thing that did not worry him too much. He had fought the seven wizards of Turgohl and from them he had learned. Aside from a few small tricks like this black fog that Bourtai raised from things he carried in his pouch, their services were all in a man's mind. If he did not believe in the horrors they conjured out of thin air, why then, they were no more than thin air and could not harm him!

He had a transient cold memory of the puff of fog that had almost slain Bourtai, then he laughed again. He whipped out his sword and tossed it high into the air, a glittering, lethal scythe of steel—caught it by the hilt as it fell. Why, of course! Bourtai believed in grass-devils. Yet a doubt lingered in his mind. Did the tiger then believe also?

Presently, the wind wafted to Wan Tengri the sound he had felt with his teeth an hour before and still there was no solid ground under his feet. Instead, the muck was softening to liquid. They sloshed through puddles of water, and in a little while the puddles ran all together and Wan Tengri was knee-deep in a stagnant lake. But the reeds marched on, higher now above his head and Wan Tengri knotted his brows and lengthened his pace. Bourtai, silent this long while, began to pant and protest querulously.

"This is madness, master," he whimpered. "You can never fight on such ground as this. Thy great tiger-thews will not help if thy foot slips!"

Wan Tengri cursed at him roughly, for he spoke the truth. One man may fight many only if he can leap to the attack and retreat in a single lightning moment, and if a foot slipped— Growing careless of sound, Wan Tengri began to lope forward. His teeth showed through his beard. What did the splashing matter? Against the hard, heavy beat of those marching feet, no other sound could rise. The dull metal ring of shield and sword came now with the pound of disciplined boots. The earth vibrated with it, and the reeds quivered.

No wind now; no sound save that stirring drumbeat of the march. So the legions of Rome tramped the Appian Way, iron-linked with discipline, swinging armored leg to leg. He could catch the harsh slang of a leader's sword *bang-bang-banging* out the rhythm for those feet. And still about Wan Tangri, the water deepened and the reeds lifted toward the sky. He cursed and raised his bow high to shield it, and his muscles stretched to keep the heavy time of marching men that crept into his brain and blood. Wan Tengri found a moment to wonder at disciplined, marching men in a country where nomads rode wildly to the hysteria of drums that kept no rhythm at all, but goaded men to madness—as the thudding concussion of this march was goading him. By Ahriman, had Rome sent its legions here?

Wan Tengri's lips skinned back from his teeth and his eyes were buried in wrinkled slits of flesh. No one man could smash the Roman legions. For a moment, the red giant wavered in his forward rush, came to a halt with the water of the fen crawling hot about his thighs. Under frowning brows, he glared ahead, and strangely it was from the grass-devils that he drew courage. The legions of Rome needed no incantations to bolster the force of their arms! Their thrusting steel and the stab of javelin, the brazen weight of their crushing tread would trample down the foe like grapes in the press. And the earth would drink red wine.

"To me, Bourtai," Wan Tengri said through tight lips. "Climb to my shoulders, and tell me whether these be the legions of Rome."

Bourtai scuttled to his side. The tiger shield was half-submerged and the silky tail was a trailing snake on the surface. Bourtai's monkey face was twisted with fright. "Rome?" he whispered. "What is this place, Rome? You speak of legions?"

Wan Tengri swore and seized the pipe-stem, stringy arms and even the movements as he hoisted the wizard high upon his shoulders were timed to the awful tread of feet.

"Rome is mistress of the world," he rasped, "and her legions are shod in steel and blood. At their head will march a standard of eagles and their faces will be stern and haughty with the pride of men who have never tasted defeat, for those men who falter die where they stand—and only the victors live! Tell me, Bourtai," and even Wan Tengri's deep rumble was muted in his throat. "Tell me, Bourtai, do these be men of Rome?"

He lifted Bourtai between his thick hands as if he offered the small wizard as a sacrifice to high gods—and Bourtai's head only topped the reeds. The tremors of Bourtai's body ran along his arms and they, too, partook of that universal ponderous rhythm. The ceaseless voices of the grass were still and in all the world there was only that sound. Presently, the thinness of Bourtai's voice came down to Wan Tengri's ears.

"They march on a raised road, master, but they march behind no eagles," he said, "and theirs are not the faces of conquerors but of beaten, frightened

men! On their heads they wear iron helms that bear the horns and tails of animals, of *aurochs* and wolf and others that I do not know. And, master, their hair is fiery red like thine, and it hangs long and waving about their shoulders, but their faces are without hair, and they are white men."

Wan Tengri swore and an incredulous light leapt into his eyes. "Their swords, Bourtai!" he whispered. "Their swords are long, and their hilts are long and they carry them slung over their shoulders like a bow!"

"It is as you say, master," Bourtai twisted his scrawny neck to peer downward. "Are these then men of thy race, master? Is this thy kingdom—"

Wan Tengri dropped Bourtai into his arms, eased him down into the water and his eyes blazed wide. "Only among the barbarians of the North," he rumbled, "are men with hair like mine. Sometime, I will tell thee a tale—Bourtai, you tremble, I think."

Bourtai was small beneath the might of Wan Tengri's hand, and he swallowed like a reproved child, yet there was a malicious shrewdness in his eyes. "Then, master," he said, "you spring from a race of slaves!"

"Ha!" Wan Tengri cried and Bourtai moaned under the sudden tightening of his blunt fingers. "I have slit a Roman throat for less," he said, and there was a hissing throatiness to his words that turned Bourtai livid, that colored his dark cheeks greenish and sick.

"Master, master!" he babbled. "I speak but truth. Those men march under the lash! I saw the whips swing high and saw them bite into flesh, and no man resented the sting. And yet, master . . . and yet—"

"Speak, thou offal!"

"Master, I did not see the men who swung the whips! Perhaps, Wan Tengri, their masters are the devils of the grass!"

Wan Tengri released Bourtai with a thrust that sent him reeling backward, that plunged him beneath the stagnant, stinking surface of the fen, so that he came up gasping, with green scum dripping from the mouse-colored hair—and with a dagger in his fist.

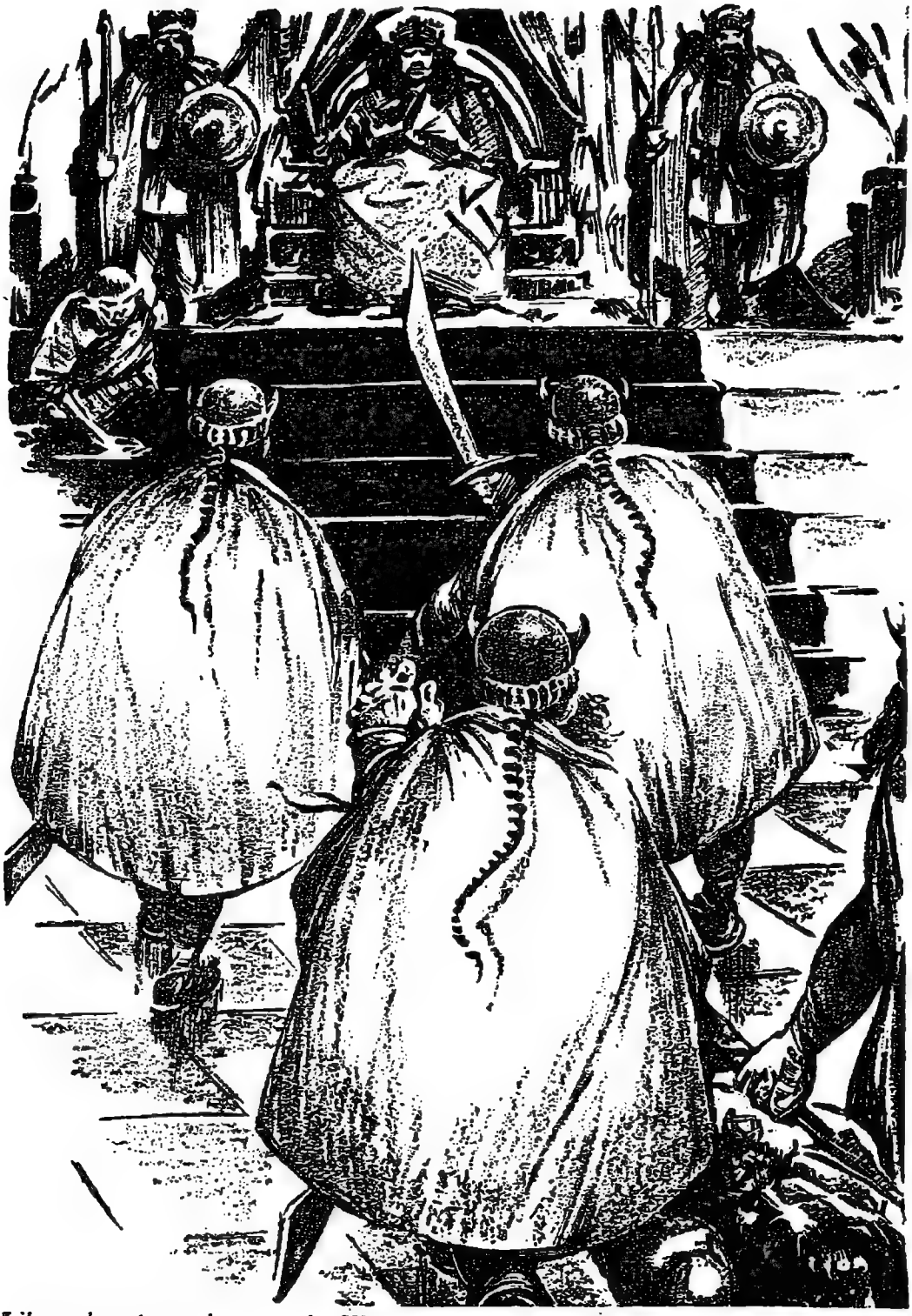
"Now, by Ahriman and by Ormazd," said Bourtai, and his voice was a whining whisper. "That is a thing—" His arm whipped sideways and the dagger sheened through the air, but Wan Tengri brushed it aside like some small, stinging gnat.

"You keep things from me, Bourtai," he rumbled. "You saw more than that!"

Bourtai's teeth shone in his dripping face, "Why, yes, thou empty-headed fool," he said. "I keep something back!" He sprang backward a long pace and was only half-visible through the reeds; another and he was out of sight entirely, and his voice lifted thinly from his covert. *"Aye! Aye! thou grass-devils! Here is the man you seek!"*

Wan Tengri swore at the treachery, but Bourtai was beyond reach and from the road a rough voice lifted in a tongue that Wan Tengri had never heard, and suddenly the heavy tramp of marching feet was stilled. There was never any stillness like the silence that fell then over the waving sea of Buryat and the fen water where Wan Tengri crouched, and into that silence Bourtai shouted again, and it was in the same strange tongue of the man on the road, and Wan Tengri could not doubt what it said.

He rasped a fierce oath and whipped his giant bow over his head. He struggled to string its great length without wetting the vulnerable gut in the thigh-deep water, and from the raised road where the helmed, red-headed slaves were marching, he heard the clang of a sword on a shield, the shout of an order. Arrows began to snick through the reeds and the marching of feet resumed, but this time that heavy, that



Like a deer trussed on a pole, Wan Tengri was brought before the fat little king.

earth-shaking tread moved—toward the covert where Wan Tengri crouched, and struggled to string his bow!

III.

Now Wan Tengri's great bow was above five cubits in length, so that, stood upon the ground, it topped his own mighty stature, and he was accustomed to rest its butt upon his right toe to slip the loop of the gut into its proper notch. So great was its strength that, with the pull of horn and sinew and wood, it had a reversed curve when unstrung and many a lesser man had struggled with all his strength merely to attach the gut. Now, thigh deep in water, Wan Tengri must string his bow —yet keep the gut dry.

Through a space of heartbeats while the searching arrows of the unseen warriors whined hungrily through the reeds, while the heavy tread of the onmarching force broke from the steadiness of solid land and began to slosh through water, Wan Tengri considered his bow. Then he braced the unstrung tip against his hip bone and looped the gut about right hand, for the bow itself was beyond the reach of even his long, powerful arm. And then, by the cutting gut wrapped about his hand, Wan Tengri—bent the bow! Sweat sprang out on his temples, and the swelling veins writhed there like small purple serpents, but the bow bent enough, and more than enough to allow for that loop of gut about his mighty fist. He slid the loop into the notch, untwisted his hand and the bow snapped into shape, the string muttered a faint, twanging note, like the warning snarl in the throat of a cornered beast.

Wan Tengri's sword leaped from its sheath and a single sweeping slash cleared away the reeds from around him. An arrow leaped from his quiver and notched to the gut and the battle laughter of Prester John roared from his lips. It was in the tongue he had learned from a fiery-tressed mother, long ago dead and gone to her gods, that Wan Tengri shouted his challenge to the still unseen enemy. And he spoke to the red-haired slaves.

"Ho, thou men of fire and valor, will you fight for slave-masters? Then come and find your death at the hands of a bolder brother, for today you battle against Amlairic, son of Aimraica, of the tribe and the fame of Scythia. Ho, if you be Goths, come and meet your death like men!"

Under the beat of Wan Tengri's voice, the rustle of arrows fainted and died and wondering shouts answered in a tongue he knew and yet did not know. It was the tongue his mother had taught him, and yet there was a strange and roughened difference that he could not gauge. And Wan Tengri heard a thing which sickened him.

He heard the crack of biting whips and their thud into living flesh, and he heard once more the gabble of the tongue in which Bourtai had cried out. It was then, for the first time, that Wan Tengri bent his titan's bow, and when his arrow tore its separate tunnel through the air, it sped toward the sound of the whip and the voice of these unseen masters of the red-headed race! There was a strangled scream to answer the twang of his bow and, above the reeds, a short-handled, long-lashed whip sailed into the air, tossed by the death agony of a man.

Once more, Wan Tengri challenged in his great roaring voice. "Ho, and ye be men of Goth, turn upon these dogs who master you! Turn, and slay! You have found a leader and a chieftain in Amlairic, the son of Aimraica!"

This time, there was no answer to his challenge save that other arrows than his own began to snore again. Wan Tengri's face distorted with anger and now the great booming bow was never silent, and his arrows flew high toward the raised road where the men with the whips shouted their hoarse, imperious

commands. The splash of the marching men was nearer, but the reeds still shielded him from their gaze, and he sped his arrows until his reaching hand groped in vain for another notched and tufted end. His quiver was empty!

Wan Tengri shouted. He whirled his great bow about his head and flung it high and powerfully toward the raised road and his sword whined from its sheath. A moment he crouched with all his body aching for the conflict and then, slowly, a puzzled frown worked across his brows. There was in him a strange reluctance to close with these unseen kinsmen of his; in Prester John who had never yet shirked in battle! Yet a plan was taking shape in his brain. He cared naught for men of so little spirit as to bow their neck in slavery, but freed, they would make grand soldiers with their discipline that was like the steel and brass of the legions of Rome! If he could reach and slay their masters—

Wan Tengri grinned and stared with distaste at the scummy, opaque waters in which he stood. He rolled his broad shoulders and glared his defiance toward the swaying reeds that marked the line of the red-haired legion. He dumped conical Mongol hat and trailing coat upon the surface where the shield of tiger skin floated, and he dropped on his knees and sucked in a deep breath—and plunged his fiery proud head beneath the fen land scum!

Sword thrust naked through his breechclout, he swam with great sweeping strokes below the surface of the reed-bound lake. Snaky stems cut across his face and his hands were foul with slime. It dragged filthy tentacles across his shoulders. He found a thick reed clump when his breath was short and, thrusting his head into its heart, let it rise slowly above the water. He could see the advancing line and his heart swelled within him. They were stalwart, thick-limbed men with fire in their hair, but no fire at all in the eyes and the spirits of them. The beast horns on their iron helmets, and the vaunting tails of wolf and tiger, mocked the men who wore them. Swords were in their teeth and the short Mongol bows they carried hummed and twanged as they sent their arrows ahead—too high by half-a-man's height to reach the hidden head of Prester John.

Wan Tengri drew his legs beneath him and clasped them hard about the clump of reeds and, when the soldier ranks were very close, he pulled his head beneath the surface. There was scarcely a ripple where it had been. The waves of the advance washed through the reeds and the men marched on. The violent agitation of the water was just beyond the reed clump, was beside it, was past! Wan Tengri dared to lift his head and breathe again. Presently, he could press on with his head just above the green surface—and he felt the ground begin to rise under his feet and, dimly through the thinning screen of reeds, could make out the wall of the raised road!

Wan Tengri whipped the slime from his blunt fingers and set them upon the sword-hilt. He bowed his back to the steep climb and his hard thighs reached out greedily. Behind him, he heard a shout and the threshing of men marching through water began to converge on that spot. They had found his Mongol cloak, his tiger shield. Well, they were welcome to them! Wan Tengri's solid lips were stretching back from his teeth, a white fang-glisten behind his thick beard, and there was a scowl building upon his brow. He would try the steel of these masters of his kinsmen, and afterward? Why, afterward, they would be the men of Prester John and they would see what wealth they could wring out of this riches-sodden East! There was also the small matter of a score to settle with one small apish wizard, should he survive the march of the red-headed legion!

Great rocks girdled the lifted road and Wan Tengri crept among them lithely, leaving the reeds and their shelter behind. The sword glittered in his fist, catching red blood-fire where the rays of the westering sun struck against it. The thick gabble of meaningless voices came to Wan Tengri's ears and he froze, motionless in mid-stride, as a tiger might turn to stone catching the scent of a desirable but dangerous quarry. Through a crevice between two piled stones, Wan Tengri gazed upward —and saw the masters of the red legion and, in part, Wan Tengri felt stirred to hard, shaking laughter; and in part he felt a hot rising rage.

THERE WERE three of these men on the brink of the road-wall with their accursed whips in their fists, and long, curved, swords with unguarded hilts at their thighs and not one was over three cubits in height, three times the length of Wan Tengri's forearm, from elbow to tip of middle-finger! They were a mockery and a travesty of men, yet their faces, too, had the pigmentation of Wan Tengri's own kind, and their beards were great as their owners were small. Thick, massy twisted curls bristled from their cheeks, almost to their eyes; their brows were beetling and heavy and the hair was thick on the backs of their hands and on the nakedness of their bandied legs beneath their robes. On the point of hurling himself upward in a charge, Wan Tengri paused to reestimate his new-found enemy. There was a breadth of shoulder and a stockiness of build that spoke of brawny muscles, and their swords were long. Ah, to Ahriman with them! Since when did Wan Tengri hesitate to attack three men of any race whatever, whether they were the giants of north Chin, with their heavy-bladed *tsurugi,* or barbarians in the Circus at Alexandria?

Wan Tengri lifted from behind his rocks and went up the last cubits of the grade and his sword swung easily in his fist, and his gray eyes bore upon the three broad dwarfed men hiding behind the thickets of their beards. One of them swung toward Wan Tengri, and his voice cracked out in the strange tongue. He swung the whip behind him and sent its lash licking fiercely toward Wan Tengri's face!

On the instant, fury leaped hotly into Wan Tengri's throat. His sword flashed and the severed whip-end fell to earth, writhing like a living thing among the rocks, and Wan Tengri stooped to snatch up a jagged chunk of stone. He stooped, and sprang back, with a curse of amazement in his throat for, while he stooped, the whip-end was turning into an arrow that, without bow to speed it, hurled straight for Wan Tengri's breast! Only the sword of Wan Tengri could have moved so swiftly, but the arrow, severed once more, fell to the ground and now it became two serpents that coiled and struck at him with their fanged jaws.

Wan Tengri stared at them and made no move to strike again, though they were writhing close to his feet. His face lifted and the jut of his jaw was like the chunk of stone he gripped in his left fist. So there were wizards here, too! And he did not wonder any longer at the captivity of his own race. They had ever been stupid about such superstitious things. Thanks be to Christos, Wan Tengri was free of such foolishness. He lifted the fist that held the jagged stone and pressed its back against the bit of True Cross about his throat. It would protect him against wizards!

Wan Tengri went steadily up the sharp rise. He was aware that one of the short, bearded ones was shouting and that there were answering cries from the reeds behind him. Yet, the red legion would obey the wizards and come back to kill the one man who could save them! And there were six of the fierce dwarfs on the crest of the ridge,

their long, slightly curved swords without the guards, balanced lightly in their two hands. Another darted up behind them and dropped to his knee with a short, powerful bow in his hand. He twanged an arrow toward Wan Tengri, and the sword slashed through the air and bit it in half. And Wan Tengri seemed scarcely aware that he had destroyed the arrow. His eyes held on the seven men who confronted him, and on their waiting swords. Once more the bow twanged, and the sword did its service.

"Fools!" Wan Tengri taunted them, though he knew they could not understand. "Fools, do you think to kill Prester John with your petty magic tricks? Do you think your feeble arrows can pierce my flesh? Get ready your toy swords that Prester John may smash them all at one sweet cut. Weaklings! Dwarf magicians!" Wan Tengri finished his challenge with a hoarse shout and leaped upward to meet the swords, yet swayed back as the six blades chopped down together toward his red head.

By the thickness of a steel dagger's blade, the hissing swords missed Wan Tengri and, afterward, his own mighty, curved blade whined through the air. Properly swung, that sword could slash off the head of a charging horse, but Wan Tengri had no mind now to put forth his full strength. Heavy exertion in a blow slowed a man in dodging, and there were seven swords opposed to him —there *had* been seven swords!

Light as the touch of the dawn-wind, Wan Tengri feathered the curved tip of his sword across two throats before he sprung sideways and with two more great leaps reached the level of the road. Two of the bearded dwarfs were staggering in bloody death, trying to contain their gaping throats with gnarled and trembling hands. Ludicrously, the half of their beards had already floated to the earth, and Wan Tengri laughed, whipping his blood-dimmed blade before him like a flail.

"Come, small, twisted wizards!" he growled at them. "There are still five chins to be shaven!"

The five were coming. They scarcely glanced toward the two of their number who were dying, and their swords were lifted straight before them as if banners floated on their tips. Wan Tengri could find it in his heart to admire these small, angry warriors! There was no flinching in their gaze as they came forward, steadily, and the red sunlight glancing on their uplifted steel, showed no wavering. Wan Tengri shifted his footing a little, settling his boots more deeply into the dust of the road. His keen ears kept watch on the legions in the fen water. They were coming back at a run, as the high and furious threshing of the water told him.

Wan Tengri shouted, and charged the five waiting swords! As if they performed a parade ground drill, three of the men dropped to their knees and presented the curved points like spears for Wan Tengri's charging breast. While the other two cocked their blades across their shoulders, both arms tensed for a death slash that Wan Tengri knew could split him in two halves. Yet Wan Tengri did not check his charge. At the last moment, he flung himself in a wide leap to the left. His sword engaged the down-sweep of the upright man on the right flank, skated under it and slashed the armpit to the bone. Wan Tengri's hard-swung left fist, still holding the rock, took the second upright man on the back of the skull and hammered him forward upon the kneeling rank—and then Wan Tengri was all over those crouching men. The curved scimitar of Damascus was restless as the head of a cobra that danced for the snake-trainer's piping, and at every swaying touch, it drew a fresh spurt of red.

Wan Tengri whirled from the

slaughter and found a single man to oppose him. The man's right arm dangled by a shred, and the life-blood was pumping from him with eager spurts, but he poised the long, two-handed sword in his left hand and came in dauntlessly.

"Stay away, fool!" Wan Tengri growled. "You are doomed, and I would grant you a few moments of peace. *Fool!*"

The man slashed fiercely and his steel grated off Wan Tengri's warding sword. The bearded small monster pitched to his knees with weakness yet strove to drive his heavy sword home, and then his mouth gaped open and from his throat there poured a high and keening blast that stabbed through Wan Tengri's skull, that was silent while the man's mouth still gaped wide, while his throat still strained with sound—and Wan Tengri's eardrums still ached like the stab of a knife! For long and long, that man's mouth remained open, pouring forth silent sound, and then the life went out of him like a pricked wine-skin. He pitched forward into the dust of the road, struggled a very little and was still.

Wan Tengri stood over the huddled bodies, a spread-legged Colossus of blood-spattered bronze, and his great red head was sagging, and there was no joy for him in this conquest. They were fighters, these small men, but why had they tried no more of their magic upon him? He knew now that these were the masters of the grass-devils. That soundless scream was summoning more forces to blot him from the face of the earth, as that other, earlier scream—By the blue tusks of Ahriman! That first scream had sounded close to dawn, yet these men, marching along a hard road through the grasslands, had reached him only after a full day's march! Christos, these were strange men who could make their voices carry for the full distance of a day's march! They had, truly, a mighty magic—yet it was strange that no small puffs of strangling fog had flown at him while he battled and slew these seven men!

Wan Tengri's head twisted at a hoarse shout lifting from the margin of the reeds, and he saw the first of the red-haired legion thrusting toward the road. Wan Tengri moved with heavy alert steps to the verge of the road and blood dripped from the point of his curved sword.

"Stand, slave," he growled, and menace rasped in his tones. "Stand, and wait thy brothers. I am Amlairic, and I have slain these wizards who held you in thrall. Henceforward, you serve me! Your shields shall lift me to chieftainship—or you shall die as other fools have died who oppose Amlairic, whose other name is John, and whose sire and dam are the devils of the high-air!"

The man who stared up at him had the thin hawk's face of a warrior, and his brows were as wide, if his shoulders were more slender, than those of Wan Tengri. His bow was cased on his back and his gnarled hands gripped the hilt of a great two-handed sword.

"Amlairic, kinsman," he answered in the slow, roughened language that Wan Tengri imperfectly understood. "I know not thy name, nor thy blood, but it is plain thy race is ours. I, Visimar, am centurion of the legion and willingly would I and my comrades raise so fierce a warrior as thou upon our shields—"

More of the red-headed legion were crowding through the high grass to stop on the flanks of the centurion, Visimar, and peer upward with hot and wary eyes at Prester John, stalwart against the sky, feeling the solid menace of that mighty stature and the stained lethal curve of the sword; the bowed power of those massive, waiting shoulders. A mutter ran through the gathering ranks and Wan Tengri saw with appreciation that even in disarray, they formed a

rough semblance of the disciplined line of a legion. Strong warriors an emperor might envy—once he had put heart into them! What looting he would have at their head!

"Gladly would we honor thee," Visimar went on heavily, "but unless thy magic is greater than the Bear of Heaven, neither thou nor we will ever live to march a thousand paces along this same road!"

Wan Tengri's teeth flashed wolfishy through his beard. "My magic is greater," he said steadily and lifted the curve of his great sword against the sky. "This blade has drunk of wizard's blood a score of times—and I live! The grass-devils could not strangle me. I flew over thy heads to the road while the legion searched for me, and here I slew thy masters! Yes, all seven of them lie in their blood upon the road, and the whip that is both an arrow and a snake broke to bits under the kiss of my steel." Wan Tengri's voice lifted to a chant and its deepness reached out over the grass-lands, spilled flatly into endless distance.

"My magic is greater. There is a small wizard in the fen who will give testimony or I shall lop off his ears. Hear me, thou offending monkey, Bourtai, and give testimony."

Behind the legion, Bourtai's voice lifted quaveringly, "Willingly do I testify, O mighty Wan Tengri. Seven wizards did you overpower in Turgohl of the flame towers, and six of them slay and the seventh enslave."

Wan Tengri masked a smile, but there was a heat in his eyes that boded not too well for Bourtai. His had been a traitor's act, and were it not that the wizard was of more use to him alive—

"On your knees, warriors!" Wan Tengri shouted. "On your knees that I may free you of wizards' curses and give you back your hearts for battle. There is fighting and loot ahead of us, warriors, do you but follow me and the new god, Christos."

His glare bore down upon them and Visimar, first of all, dropped to his knees in fen water. Stiffly, the others followed, but kept their eyes implacably upon Wan Tengri. Prester John nodded in approval. Yes, these were good men save that their backbones needed more steel. It was well he had a new god to give them. A new god could do a great deal for a man, when the old gods had played him false.

"You bow the knee," Wan Tengri said steadily, "to the new god of Rome and Alexandria, of Byzantium and . . . well, there is far Turgohl also, where they all went down on their knees to Christos, in accordance with a vow I had made. It is true, I cut a few throats beforehand—" A grin struggled here and there to the shaven face of a warrior. Wan Tengri could feel their spirits meeting with his, and his voice strengthened. "Christos will be a great god some day and he's done a good bit for me. I could tell you tales . . . well, there isn't time now. Tonight around the campfire, perhaps. Christos will take care of you. Being new, he has not too many followers and can look after those he has. Up, warriors now, and mount the road. Visimar, to me! We go back the way you came for a bit of wizards' loot and afterward, well there is all the East! Mount, and the first man who lags behind, I'll lop off his ears, but the second man, I'll turn into a dwarf"—Wan Tengri made his sword whine through the air—"by removing his head! Come, you warrior wolves, mount the road!"

More grins creased the faces that moved upward toward him, and swords shot home into sheaths over their shoulders and, even in that climb, they kept their line. From the reeds they had left peered the frightened, monkey face of Bourtai. He began to scramble in their wake—and Visimar reached the road.

Wan Tengri and Visimar confronted each other and, after the manner of

fighting men the world over, took each other's measure. There was a litheness in Visimar's body that matched the thewed toughness of Wan Tengri. The iron helmet with its *aurochs'* horns domed a broad brow, a shirt of mail swung about his thighs, and the fringe of a woolen kilt emphasized the corded strength.

Wan Tengri realized abruptly that Visimar's eyes were reaching beyond him. He saw lines of white tighten about the man's mouth, saw fear straining his eyes wide, and his voice came out in a choked moan.

"Prepare your magic, Amlairic," he said hoarsely, "and work it swiftly—for Tinsunu, the Heaven-Bear, comes to avenge the death of his grandsons!"

Wan Tengri felt the bristling of cold fear along his spine in answer to the abject fright of Visimar and it stiffened all his body in resistance. His jaw knotted under the fierceness of his beard and he turned only slowly to face this fresh menace before which the red legion already was prostrating itself upon the dusty road in terror. He was not ready for this trial, had hoped to strengthen his hold upon these men before he confronted again the might of the wizards whom Visimar called Tinsunchi, the grandsons of the Heaven-Bear. His forearm bunched with the grip upon his sword hilt and, pivoting so slowly, he shouted in mockery at the groveling warriors.

"Are you men or skulking jackals that you bow before dwarfed wizard fools, who have not as yet even threatened you? Their magic cannot harm you, unless—"

A ROAR drowned out even Wan Tengri's belly-deep voice. There was no mistaking the sound. Wan Tengri had heard it too many times in the arena at Alexandria where the great savage brown bears of the north were baited by men and slaves. This was a thousand times more terribly loud, and formless with rage and wild menace. Wan Tengri whipped about, body bent like a bow at full-draw and defiance pulled a voiceless shout from his breast. The proved sword in his hand became as puny as a switch of willow. His bronzed flesh and tempered muscles felt vulnerable and his soul shrank within him, for surely no such beast as this which his eyes beheld had ever lived!

It was a very god of bears. As huge as three of the elephants of Hind, the great brown beast raged across the sea of Buryat. Its red mouth was strained wide enough to swallow even Wan Tengri at a single gulp and the roars that tore from its throat like the bellows of angry Beloss, the thunder-god, beat a man's brain to numbness. Upright, like a man, the beast moved, yet its short, massive legs covered distance faster than the charge of Mongol lances!

Wan Tengri's hand clutched at the fragments of the True Cross and he forced himself erect, tried to drive his voice through the beast-roar to the ears of the men about him.

"This is but wizard's tricks," he said, and even his own voice lacked conviction. "There is no bear there. If you do not believe it— Look! See, the grass does not bend under his progress! He walks on top of the slender reeds! Surely, no man need fear a thing that cannot even bend a stalk of grass!"

Wan Tengri laughed fiercely, and slammed his sword home through the strip of loincloth that girdled his waist, folded bronzed arms across the swelling of his chest, and his teeth flashed in a wide, mocking smile—and yet he could not shake out of his soul the barb of doubt that had sunk there. If he did not believe it—but, Christos, the thing was there before his eyes! The roar of it beat his ears in, and the wind of its passage rushed ahead to sweep his fiery hair back from his broad forehead, to tear at the stiff thrust of his beard.

So he glared into the gaping jaws of the Heaven-Bear, and saw the last red rays of the westering sun, strike fire from white glistening fangs, saw the forearm, thicker than the legs of three elephants, drawn back to destroy him with cubit-long claws!

Men's heads were lifted a little and the awed eyes of Visimar saw Prester John stand, empty-handed and unmoved, to face the assault of the Heaven-Bear. Words mumbled from Visimar's lips. "By this new god, Christos, now, if he stands against the assault of the Heaven-Bear—" His thought was unfinished, but the hardening of his jaw line, the slow tensing of his fighting thews, gave promise of action. If only Wan Tengri stood against the Heaven-Bear—

For a moment, from the crest of the ridge behind him, Bourtai peered into the face of the menace, then he turned and scuttled back toward the fen and the reeds and plunged his head and his whole body beneath the scummy waters. Even there, it seemed to Bourtai, he could hear the defiant laughter of Wan Tengri, and his small soul trembled in his breast, for the courage of the red giant was a thing beyond his understanding. In the face of this certain death, Wan Tengri was laughing—

The great claw with its sword-blade claws swept toward him and Wan Tengri watched it come, and suddenly the last doubt was gone from his brain. Such things as this monster could not be. It was mere magicians' trickery. This—why, it was no more than a cloud of smoke!

Wan Tengri waved an arm contemptuously. "Begone!" he cried.

The bear was gone. It was no longer a nightmare beast, but a cloud of brown and black smoke that hovered toward him on the breath of the sunset wind and, triumphantly, Wan Tengri turned toward the cowering men upon the dust and saw the eyes of Visimar upon him and knew that he had conquered. He had conquered—then in the name of the twelve devils, what was he, Wan Tengri, doing on his knees in the dust?

Wan Tengri roared out his own anger and it was in a voice to match the fierceness of the Heaven-Bear. He was on his knees in the dust, and he could not rise. He groped for his sword and his hand could not feel the hilt. The road rose up and struck him across the face and the hot dust eddied into his nostrils and stung his eyes. He called on the last resources of his titan's body, braced arms and unfeeling knees against the surface of the road to rise. His body lifted a palm from the dust. His shoulders bowed with the might of his effort, and he drew a single knee beneath him. He lifted his trailing long hair from the dust and twisted his distorted face upward toward the black cloud that hovered above him. The last rays of the sun were blotted out and absorbed into its heart and there was only darkness. One last time, Wan Tengri hurled his laughing defiance into the heart of the dark cloud, and the tendrils of that blackness reached out to him, and touched his eyes and fingered into his very soul and brain—and expanded there.

The black cloud was within him, and it filled his every fiber. He was no longer fighting; he was buoyed on a vast swaying cloud and he could hear the blackness ringing like a deep bell; he could see metallic sounds, silver crisp against the breast of an impenetrable night; could see another, heavy, regular sound that lifted in sullen waves from the earth rhythm, dancing as a chained bear dances when the pipes play and his master prods with a sharpened spear. Dimly, he could feel the prick of the spear, in arm and calf, and presently in wrist and ankle.

Sometime, in the blackness, Wan Tengri swam back to consciousness, and

Slowly, slowly the struggle of muscle against muscle changed—the bear bent back—back—

realized that he was among tramping, marching men; heard once more the clank and thud of a marching legion and felt his own body sway with the rhythm of sword clanging on metal shield. Yet he was not himself marching. He lifted his dangling head and saw a litter carried on the shoulders of the red-headed men of the legion and, peering from its rear was the grinning, mocking face of Bourtai, carried in state like an emperor!

It was only when he had absorbed the shock of these things, like flesh wincing to the vital stab of well-thrown javelins, that Wan Tengri realized to the full the thing that was happening to him. He, too, was being carried, but in no litter of state! His wrists and ankles had been bound together with harsh ropes and between them had been thrust a lance that four men carried on their shoulders, so that he dangled beneath it, head swaying limply, body as helpless as if he were some beast slain in a hunt, a trophy carried home to suffer in abject slavery the whims of those wizards who were called in awful truth the grandsons of the Heaven-Bear!

IV.

Life and rebellion pounded strongly through the veins of Wan Tengri so that he wrenched savagely at the hempen ropes that held him to the lance; and the men who carried him staggered and faltered in their stride. One turned a pleading face, pale in the red glare of the torches, and from the darkness strode a red-headed warrior. He struck Wan Tengri in the teeth with the hilt of his dagger.

"Quiet, fool," he snarled. "We know you now for the false wizard that you are. You will need your strength and your false spells soon enough!"

Wan Tengri spat blood and put his gaze on the pale glowing frenzy of the man's eyes, took in the helmet twined with the silver and black of a snow leopard's tail and studded with its talons and teeth.

"I will remember thee, thou who boast your kinship to the rear end of a cat," he promised quietly.

The man's gaze faltered and his lips fumbled with words: "I but do my duty, Amlairic," he muttered and twisted about a leathern bottle to offer a drink, but Wan Tengri's eyes never wavered and his eyes were mocking and fierce, so that the man dodged back into the darkness and Wan Tengri was alone again. The familiar clank and thud of the marching legion beat into his ears and he sucked in the smells of sweat and dust and fen land. Flickering light from the torches made splotches of shifting red upon the swaying plumes of grass. There was no moon and the stars were pale—and Wan Tengri realized that he had been unconscious for hours and that the new dawn was near. He could sniff it in the freshness of the stirring wind.

Wan Tengri let his head sag backward so that his inverted gaze rested unwaveringly on the silks that hid Bourtai and bitterness ate into his belly. His fiery hair trailed up a small cloud of dust. Ho, Prester John, where is your loot now? Where the golden city you and your new god, Christos, will ravage with red-headed furies? Wan Tengri snorted out ironic laughter that strangled him and pale faces twisted toward him once more and there was awe, and a touch of fear in their gaze.

At last the shuffle of wearied feet sounded more closely in Wan Tengri's ears and he saw that the road was sunken now into a canyon of green growth thrice the height of a tall man and, ahead, were the low white glistening walls of a city. Feet clumped hollowly and the dampness of fresh water scent cooled his nostrils from beneath the bridge, there was the challenge of the gate guard and afterward the sword beat a sharper rhythm of the shield and

the legion picked up its marching stride, went its echoing way between close white walls on which the torches made a fire-blush. There were balconies of metal and rich silks hung straight down and nowhere were there any towers. The flat roofs crowded close to the ground and Wan Tengri grinned his sour approval. This, then, was why no man spoke of a city in the sea of Buryat!

The paved street ended and the legion's boots lifted clouds of strangling white dust that tasted of camel-dung and the houses were left behind. They clanked through another walled gate and Wan Tengri was in a city of tents. Skins of animals formed roof and walls, hides of horses and wolf, and there was one that was larger than the rest and it was covered with the rich furs of the black foxes of the north.

Before this one, just as the pearling of the sky turned rosy with morning, the men who carried Wan Tengri staggered to a halt—and the lance that carried him was dropped into the forks of two upright posts and Wan Tengri continued to dangle helplessly there while the tented city stirred to wakefulness and women and children came to mock and harass him, and the sun brightened until it was a brassy sword that pierced his very brain. But Wan Tengri clamped his dry lips beneath the harshness of his red beard and spoke no word, though with his pain and his weariness, the world hazed into unreality about him—and hours passed.

Only the jerk of his tortured limbs told him presently when he was moving again and he called fiercely on the reserves of his drained strength for he knew that the end of this travail was near—and that another, sharper test lay ahead! He forced up his throbbing head and saw that the arched gate through which he was carried was faced with human gargoyles, with the tortured bodies and heads of red warriors slain by their masters. From the battlemented crest, the bearded faces of the dwarfed Tinsunchi peered down incuriously.

Past a bazaar they swung where venders shrieked from booths of brass and silk and gold and other booths where the scent of spices came out richly. The small women of Tinsunchi went freely in the streets and their hair hung long and lustrous upon their heads and each one was followed by men in silks. Small children pelted Wan Tengri with filth and a pig surged grunting out of a mud hole beneath him.

The crooked alleys gave way to a broad avenue, where cedar and fir and larch threw patches of black shadow and there were ranks of stone statues whose pediments bore the graven figure of a bear, that walked like a man. And so they came to the steps of a pillared palace whose low façade stretched for a hundred cubits in each direction, and the men who bore Wan Tengri got down on their knees and, afterward, they crawled. Wan Tengri felt the hot marble scrape the skin from his back and he knew that they approached the ruler of the Tinsunchi—and Wan Tengri laughed.

"Thanks to you, brothers," he mocked the guard. "It is a rest for my ankles and wrists."

They dragged Wan Tengri, crawling so, through a hall draped in silks and ermine and sable, which the Mongols called *rondes* and valued each at two thousand *aurei*, and they came into a courtyard that was cool beneath the high reach of green trees and the spray of perfumed fountains. In its midst was a small white pyramid and from it mounted a slim pillar that was mounted by a golden ladder, and on its crest was a golden tripod upholding a globe that concentrated all the splendid agony of the sun so that Wan Tengri was forced to shut his bold eyes. He turned them instead upon the man in a long robe of

scarlet silk who knelt over a small fire that burned on the steps of the pyramid and attached to the man's head were huge, tufted golden fans shaped like the hundred-times enlarged ears of a bear. And the man coughed and laughed by turns, and there was no mirth in his laughter and no humanity.

"They chose the wrong animal," Wan Tengri mocked hoarsely. "Surely they mean those for the ears of an ass!"

No man answered him, but one of the red warriors moaned a little for terror and Wan Tengri set his jaws rigidly against the new pain of his raw back and the jerking at his ankles and wrists which were swollen purple under the cruel bite of the hempen ropes. Yet, as they left the courtyard and, through high bronze doors, entered a hall where the drapes were of gauze of gold, Wan Tengri set a smile upon his mouth and carried his head stiffly.

Thus, for the first time, dragged feet foremost across the inlaid floor by red warriors who alternately crawled and paused to bump their foreheads on the cruel stone, Wan Tengri saw the throne of the Tinsunchi, the throne of the Heaven-Bear. And the man who sat upon it was obscenely fat with carmine on his beardless lips and *kohl* about his greasy eyes, and his hair hung in long, oiled ringlets about his silken shoulders. The smile on Wan Tengri's lips turned wolfish, for he saw the ruler of the Tinsunchi—and that before the throne, beating his wizened monkey face upon the floor, was the small, treacherous wizard, Bourtai!

WAN TENGRI sent his hoarse, mocking laughter upward toward the golden beams of the ceiling, and he mocked the guards as they beat their foreheads once more upon the floor.

"*Phagh,* what need to do that, slaves of a painted man? Not even this marble can beat brains into thy empty skulls!"

A shout of anger burst from the bearded spear-guards about the bear-throne and their shields clashed against golden armor and they started forward with spearpoints flicking out, but the man on the throne lifted a fat, beringed hand whose nails were tinted gold and the guards fell back, glaring. Wan Tengri tried to spit toward them but his mouth was too dry. He felt dully the touch of steel cool against the fever of swollen ankles and wrists—and knew that he was free of his bonds!

A mockery of freedom. He was as helpless as a crippled beggar without hands or feet, and the eager blood, pressing into his extremities, was an agony beyond bearing. Wan Tengri's lips shrank back from his grinding teeth and he bent his stiff knees and drove his body to lift itself upon them. With wooden, pain-clawed fingers he rolled into the bend of his elbow the lance that had carried him so long. He took its butt in the grip of his two elbows and by that crutch, he began to lift himself. The flat broad brass of muscles stood out on his shoulders and the cords of his neck gouged out hollows in the flesh. His body—lifted.

Darkness wheeled in his brain and the throne-room blotted out, but Wan Tengri did not falter. Slowly, resistless as time itself, his great muscles brought him upward and his feet that were stone, and yet were agony, dragged their blood traces forward across the clear white of the marble and were finally beneath him. Straddle-legged then, breath whistling between locked teeth, he stood erect before the bear-throne of Tinsunchi and the darkened blood oozed from his cut flesh. Slowly, while his elbows held their grip upon the lance-crutch, the bowed power of his shoulders straightened. His head with its fierce red hair, dust-strewn but dauntless, lifted and, when the crazy whirl of darkness left his brain, he put his bold eyes directly upon the face of the king.

About him were the shivering prostrate men of the red legion and the golden glowering guard with their poised spears. And Wan Tengri hurled his lance clattering to the marble floor and laughed. The sound of his laughter was hoarse and strained in his torture-dried throat; but its mockery and its courage were clear.

"Come, thou woman that never wert a man," he snarled at the throne. "Pass judgment on Prester John—if you have the courage!"

A shivering moan lifted from the red legion but the bearded guard only glared; for they understood only his defiance and not his words. Bourtai ground his forehead on the marble floor to make monkey grimaces at him for silence, but the sneering eyes of Wan Tengri were beyond him, challenging the limpid, *kohl*-smeared eyes of the king, simpering as he stroked his oiled curls with his beringed hands. About his temples was a fillet of gold in which a great, central ruby winked its blood-red gleams of light—and Wan Tengri saw that the ruby was carved in the likeness of an upright bear!

Silence fell into the golden chamber save that, somewhere like the tinkling of a fountain, came the faint strains of a lute and a woman's voice sang softly in words that Wan Tengri did not understand; and the air was sweet with incense. The king nodded gently and his eyes went lingeringly over the thews of Wan Tengri's braced body, and he clapped his fat palms lightly together.

Behind the throne, the curtains of golden gauze swayed apart and three creatures who might be devils, but were surely men, filed out.

The first wore a robe of midnight black and his was the head of a great brown bear, and upon his silken shroud, silver moons and golden stars whirled in shimmering ecstasy. And the second man had the head of a snake, and on his green robe was a crystal globe in whose depths fire and black smoke swirled to press out eagerly from its spout—and in the smoke were demon faces. But the third man wore scarlet and his head was hidden by two great golden ears, and on his robe was a tripod that held a circlet of blinding light.

At their entrance, one of the guards prodded the kneeling Bourtai with his spearpoint and Bourtai began to babble feverishly in the tongue that Wan Tengri did not understand, except that an oft-repeated sound presently told him that the king's name was Aosoka. When Bourtai fell silent, Aosoka lifted the fillet from his brows and put the gleaming ruby into his mouth and, afterward, he pronounced judgment in a lisping woman's voice. Bourtai's face twisted toward Wan Tengri with triumph baring his rotted ape's teeth. He knocked his head three times upon the floor and faced Wan Tengri.

"Know, O slave," he began grandiloquently, "that because of thy boasting, and because Aosoka is the all-merciful, the all-knowing, the compassionate—"

"Thy tongue is too long, monkey-face," Wan Tengri said softly. "Presently, I shall shorten it."

Bourtai's face twitched. "Get of wind-devils," he spat. "Thou hast won through me, thy friend even in this hour, a chance for thy life! Thou shalt match thy strength with the Heaven-Bear—but without weapons, Wan Tengri!"

Wan Tengri looked down at his swollen, useless wrists, and at his blood-oozing ankles and his knees that he kept from quivering with weakness only because his will was greater than his strength and he pumped the hard, taunting laughter from his throat. It turned wild and shrill in his mouth and he bit it back.

"Why, surely, my friend," he whispered. "Why, surely! Lead me to this Heaven-Bear of thine and I will shake the throne on which Aosoka sits so that

he topples from it and bruises his fat body. I ask only this one thing, friend, that you shall enter the arena with me: I need—thy magic spells!"

Bourtai's yellowish skin had a greenish tinge and his voice became a whine in his throat. "Already, Wan Tengri, master," he whimpered, "Aosoka has ordered this thing. I will work my small spells, master, to lend thee strength, and this one more thing—I have gained for thee. Thou needest not meet with this monster till the trumpets sound the Hour of the Bear, which we know, master, as the Hour of the Swine."

Even as Bourtai spoke, cymbals clanged and, from the walls, the trumpets wailed dimly—and Bourtai shivered. "That, master, is the Hour of the Dog. In one hour, when the trumpets sound again—"

Wan Tengri's great, shaggy head was thrust forward and his shoulders arched with power. He looked down at his hands, of which his utmost will contrived merely to crook the fingers a little. Soon they would stiffen, and the hours of his torture would drain his racked body.

"It is too long," he growled thickly. "My magic wants but short space and I need but one thing for its working. Find for me a braided leather whip whose tip has often tasted the flesh of these red jackals about me and now, at once, I will meet and conquer the Heaven-Bear. I have spoken!" He folded his arms to hide the tremors that were creeping into his hands, tremors of weakness, not of fear. His voice bellowed out, "See to it, slave!"

Afterward, he stood on braced legs, with his proud head tipped back so that his eyes were lifted above Aosoka on his golden throne—and he hummed through his nose.

Wan Tengri heard the gabble of voices about him, the whisper as his words were translated for the bearded guards, and Bourtai's humbled, frightened pleading before the bear-throne. He ignored it all, kept his fiercely hooded eyes focused above Aosoka's pomaded head until presently Bourtai darted to him with such a whip as he had demanded. Then spearpoints ringed him in and Wan Tengri was marched away again through the perfumed court where the priest of the ears laughed his senseless laughter beside the pyramid, through the fur-hung antechamber and out into the broad avenue before the palace. And despite all his efforts, Wan Tengri's feet stumbled where there was nothing to trip him, and the hand which he forced to grip the whip almost lost its hold a score of times. Beside him, Bourtai scuttled or danced ahead to peer up into the brooding power of Wan Tengri's face. His voice was a constant thin complaint.

"You do not trust me, Wan Tengri," he whimpered, "yet what I have done was necessary. Had I not ordered you bound, they would have slain you where you lay, stricken on the road by the magic of Tinsunchi! Had I not spoken the language of their masters, and been of small stature like the bearded men, they would not have obeyed me even then. So, master, you have me to thank for this chance your magic will surely seize."

"So you believe in my magic, thou witless ape?"

"Have I not linked my fate with thine?" Bourtai was eager.

Wan Tengri snorted. "Or the fool upon the throne ordered it against thy will! Best for him that he not swallow the ruby of the bear. I'll have to slit his fat belly to recover it!" Wan Tengri's gaze ranged the gay throngs along the avenue and the eyes of women were bright and coquettish upon him, and the brows of men frowned. Overhead, the sun bore straight down and the pricks of the spears turned Wan Tengri in through a columned façade, and down a

flight of stone stairs so that, presently, he confronted a narrow door of bronze. At his side, Bourtai yelped in the monkey-gabble of the Tinsunchi.

"I have gained thee some moments for thy spells, master," he whispered. "Oh, weave them strongly—else we both die!"

Wan Tengri grunted and took the whip in both of his awkward hands, and felt that his blunt fingers were without power. He turned his lowering face upon Bourtai.

"Tie this about my right wrist with the magic knot I shall teach thee, apeling. As you love your worthless life, make it strong! Then, in the other end, but close to that knot, make such a loop as the Mongols use at the end of their lariats. I shall weave my own spells—" He threw back his head and began to roar out, in a great voice, a mocking song once used to taunt the followers of Christos, which now they chanted victoriously.

"Ruptis rupibus in Chorazinanis
Servili cuneo cuniculorum—"

The spear guards eyed him suspiciously and Wan Tengri saw that they made curious signs with their hands, as if they warded off spells. His voice deepened and he chanted on, pausing to admonish Bourtai.

"Tighter, fool, or this same Heaven-Bear will gulp you whole! Now, use one of these prodding spearpoints to slice off the whip hilt."

Wan Tengri took the lariat loop in his right hand, to which the leather thong was bound. It was a small loop, not big enough to girdle more than the paw of a bear, and Bourtai stared at it with reverent eyes, though he knew not its power.

"I shall weave more spells for thee, master, while you fight," he said softly. "Together, our might of magic—"

Wan Tengri snorted, shook the leather loop above his head and picked up his chant, this time in the language of the red legion whose men had clanked behind him down the avenue, who ringed now the temple in which he stood and placed their guards by pairs at all the doors.

"See me, you men of my race! See Amlairic fight your battle for you! See him crush the Heaven-Bear as only true sons of the north can! Yea, see him shake the roots of the bear-throne! When this battle is fought and won, Amlairic shall lead you to victory!"

He finished and drew in a deep breath, spat upon the earth. "I am ready," he said heavily.

Instantly, above him, trumpets blared and the narrow door before him swung wide—and Wan Tengri stalked through with Bourtai skipping at his side, mumbling his charms, but keeping close to the red giant. Inside the arena, Wan Tengri halted and heard the roar of a myriad voices beat down upon him, and his beard thrust out fiercely. How many times in far Alexandria had he heard the roar that greeted the gladiators? Yet he stared not up at the sea of waiting faces, but swiftly eyed the narrow circuit of the arena. It was no more than a pit among banked seats, but the barriers were high and for this moment he was alone with Bourtai beside him. Almost, his hand reached out to wring that wry neck, but Bourtai began to scrawl cabalistic figures in the sand and Wan Tengri shrugged and went forward with great springing strides, feeling the good stretch and pull of muscles in his thighs—and stumbling with his wooden feet. He cursed, paused on braced legs, to press his forearm against the amulet about his throat, the fragment of the True Cross.

"Now, Christos," said Wan Tengri reasonably, "I know that my vow still lacks fulfillment. A hundred thousand to bow before thee, I promised, if needs

be I must slit all their throats to bring them to reason. Fifty thousand I gave you in far Turgohl, and here, Christos, are another fifty thousand. But they will be stubborn, you understand, and unless I conquer this Heaven-Bear they send against me, these idolaters will never see the light of reason." He grinned, and his solid lips curved wolfishly. "So, Christos, if you want a kingdom that will praise your name carved out of this heathen east, give a little help now! A little—"

Wan Tengri rolled his massive shoulders and his arms swung at his sides, the right with that leather thong knotted hard about his forearm and carrying the loop; his left flexing with slow tension. And while he waited, there was a murmur that rose from the banked throng above him—and he saw that a bronze door had swung open and through it, ponderously, shuffled a very grandfather of bears, a beast as huge in its race as was Wan Tengri in the race of men. His sides were gaunt, his small eyes vicious with hunger and, when he saw Wan Tengri, he reared on his hindlegs and so towered a full two cubits above the red giant's head—and Wan Tengri saw the great girth of the beast's chest, and the power of the short, massive forelegs with their saber-claws.

Wan Tengri delayed a moment there in the middle of the arena. "As you see, Christos," he muttered, "I shall need—a little help!"

Wan Tengri looked at the loop of woven leather on his right wrist and then at the bear across the arena. Wan Tengri's shaggy red-head pulled forward, and the muscles across his chest and back stood out in strong relief. Slowly then, on his stumbling feet, he marched toward the bear that sat on its haunches like a man, and fanned the air with needle-armed paws to suck into his nostrils the scent of this man-thing that came toward him so boldly. And the bear uttered a roar that drowned all other sound. The savage slit of its mouth opened into a red gaping cavern of slavering fangs!

Wan Tengri did not waver in his forward stride. He heard the thin chanting of Bourtai's spells, louder since the murmur of the spectators above him had ceased. He felt the breathless waiting of the blood-hungry throng. Eyes never shifting from the bear, now less than three cubits away, Wan Tengri gathered his strength as a man might suck in a gusty breath. He leaped straight forward! A sickle-armed claw slapped at him, a blow that could have split Wan Tengri's skull. But Wan Tengri ducked under the stroke and, with a shout that rivaled that of the beast, he hurled himself squarely into the bone-crushing embrace of the great Heaven-Bear!

V.

A SHOUT was wrenched from the watching thousands but, for Wan Tengri, it was drowned out in the snarl of the beast against whom he threw his weight. The thing he had done seemed madness, but there was deep calculation in Wan Tengri's attack. His injured feet would permit no dodging, and the strength was gone from his hands until they should mend, but his mighty thighs and shoulders remained to him and it was upon these he must depend—these and the loop of leather about his wrist.

Swift as it was, Wan Tengri's leap was as precise in timing as the sword blow that could halve a flying arrow. His fiery head wedged against the throat beneath the slavering jaws of the beast. The strangling stench of its hide clogged his nostrils and the harsh hair rasped his flesh. Across his shoulders, he felt the clamp of those massive forearms, and the talons bit in. But the jaws that could enclose and crush his skull could not reach his head where it was wedged—and Wan Tengri's arms reached about the thick, powerful body of the beast.

The loop flew from his right hand and the awkward fingers of his left caught it, fumbled through the leather noose. Instantly, it cinched tight upon his flesh—binding his two wrists together and Wan Tengri was bound irrevocably to the chest of the bear! No way now he could free his wrists from the grip of the leather about them! And that was as Wan Tengri wanted—and had planned it!

All sounds were blotted from his consciousness save the snarls of the titanic beast he embraced. He could feel the reverberation in the great chest against which he pressed, like the shiver of the earth under a charge of cavalry. The bear was trying to dislodge him with short, cruel down drags of his forepaws, and the flesh was ripped on Wan Tengri's back. When the bear failed in his present effort, he would clamp those forelegs close and begin to squeeze, and Wan Tengri must be ready. Those legs had the power to crush in his ribs like dried sticks, unless his muscles interposed their might. They would. They must!

Wan Tengri dug his feet into the joints of the bear's rear haunches; his head was wedged beneath the jaw, and his arms bound fast about the bear's back. Wan Tengri arched his own back against the strain of the beast's forelegs and slowly, then explosively, he began to exert the power of his own brassy thews. His legs were locked rigidly, his body as taut as a drawn bow. It was a fantastic thing he tried, but the only thing that he could do. He was duplicating the bear's own mode of attack. With a bearlike hug, he would try to snap the spine of the beast—before the bear broke his own!

Silence fell upon the huge amphitheater as realization of the thing which Wan Tengri attempted came to the thousands; silence below, too, for Bourtai was on his knees and his sagging, pendulous mouth uttered no sound. In his throne box, Aosoka, leaned forward and his pomaded curls swung about his face but Aosoka had forgotten even them. His small pink tongue touched the carmine of his lips. The concerted breathing of the mob was like the rising moan of storm-wind in the cedars of Yablonoi.

Below them, the giant bear had ceased his vain efforts to tear the man from his chest and had set great forearms about Wan Tengri's shoulders. Where the points of the sickle claws touched, streams of red squeezed out to trace their slow patterns across the bronze of the red giant's flesh. He seemed engulfed in the deep, shaggy fur of the bear, in the embracing, all powerful arms—but Wan Tengri's back remained bent like a drawn bow. Great depressions became visible, sharply shadowed, in his thighs and across the loins. His musculature stood out as if the flesh had been stripped from him, darkened like bruised blood. Those who could see his leather-bound wrists, deep sunk in the thick hair of the bear's back, saw that the thongs had bit into flesh and there was blood there, too. His hands were dark red—were purple.

Against the bear's chest, Wan Tengri had twisted his face to the side and his lungs gasped in air in spasms, and the long hair seemed to entangle his breath and impede it. He was no longer conscious of scent—of sound. There was blackness and blinding light before his eyes. There was an intolerable stricture about his shoulders and an agony in his straining heart. But Wan Tengri's legs still thrust, strong and straight, against the haunches of the bear; his head was burrowing deeper beneath the jowls, and the curve of his back was a clean, true arch. Neither man nor beast moved. That moment dragged itself into an eternity, the locked counterpoise of muscle against muscle. It would be like this to the death. When one gave, it would be the end. If the arch

In the instant of his defense, Wan Tengri saw the snow leopard vanish—and become a sword-armed warrior!

of Wan Tengri's back crumpled, he would be shredded, pulped against the bear's chest. If the bear bent backward—

A moan shivered over the hard-breathing mob for, almost imperceptibly—Wan Tengri's back had straightened! The true arch was flattening! If now he could not regain that curve, he was finished. And how could he? Surely, his muscles had been strained to the utmost long ago; surely this man racked by the tortures of the lance sling could not much longer endure! It was true Wan Tengri's back had straightened. For a fraction, he relaxed the hard tautness of his muscles, but it was with a purpose. He let them sag as a man takes a deep breath before a plunge into deep frigid water. And then—

The men who watched saw no change. It was impossible that Wan Tengri's muscles should exert greater strength; impossible! No, it was nothing that their straining eyes could see, but they heard a sound. The bear had long since ceased to snarl and now, deep in its chest, it uttered a sound like—like a whine! It was a faint thing, barely audible. Bourtai heard it and leaped to his feet. He threw both arms high above his head and began to chant with a wild and frantic voice, so that the thousands heard no more.

Wan Tengri had heard that whine through the blindness that exertion laid in thick black blankets upon his brain. He heard it, and for a moment that might have been centuries, it meant nothing to him. Then triumph strained a muffled shout from his throat. From somewhere in the depths of his soul, his will struck out, a lambent, flaming thing—and Wan Tengri found new strength. His corded neck was rigid as stone and there was no flexion in the stiffness of

back and thighs. His shoulders bunched mighty muscles beneath the crush of the bear's forearms, and the bear whined again, more loudly, and with strain. Its muzzle—its muzzle was moving upward, was pointing toward the white-hot skies!

Men were suddenly on their feet shouting. There were women who screamed and tore at their clothing and, in their dens, captive animals snarled and crowded into the darkness of the farthest recess of their caverns. Men leaned across the barriers, shaking their fists, faces crimson with their hoarse, meaningless cries. The bear's muzzle was pointed straight upward and that way it stayed, rigid while the shouting reached a crescendo that shook the earth; rose and died, and rose again—and became silence. The end came suddenly. The bear flung itself wildly to the earth. Its legs, with their slicing claws, waved in the air. Sand lifted in a high, biting cloud, but through all that fury of despair, the hard-set bow of Wan Tengri's body shone, unmoving, resistless as time.

The bear lay upon its side, chest heaving, throat torn with roars that were half whimpers of pain and fear. It was then that Wan Tengri moved, if it could be called movement. The arch of his back did not change, but something that might have been the visible convulsion of his will rippled over his bronzed body. The bear's whine became shrill, became a scream almost human in its intensity. The muzzle passed the zenith and wrenched crookedly backward; the spine bent like the slow draw of a mighty bow—and like a bow, grown old and dry with disuse, it broke. The dull crack of it made a flat echo across the arena and, instantly, the fury of men's blood madness was let loose again. Men and women flung themselves over the barrier, dancing in a Corybantic insanity—and Bourtai ran to Wan Tengri's side and sliced the thongs from his wrists.

Wan Tengri felt the plucking of Bourtai's hands and the prodding of Bourtai's voice and his drained body moved feebly, as if in the convulsion of death itself. The pounding of his heart, the bellows heave of his lungs was suffocating. He had never breathed before and, never in his life again would be able to suck in enough air. He was free. He was no longer straining. By Christos, he had won! It was the thought, rather than any conscious will, that dragged Wan Tengri to his feet. Straight and powerful, stood the red giant above the carcass of the Heaven-Bear. Blood streaked his limbs, and it was his own, yet his head and beard blazed like the sun, yet could not rival the fire that thrust from his conquering eyes. He towered above the froth of small bearded men; did not see the women who flung treasures of gold and jewels at his feet.

"So will Prester John crush all who oppose him," he said thickly. "Bow down and worship, fools!"

But he spoke in Alexandrian Greek, which no man of them understood, and his moment of triumph-born strength deserted him—and Wan Tengri staggered and fell, face-down, across the bear he had slain. In his box, Aosoka lifted a hand to touch the ruby that glowed on his forehead and his fat-creased eyes lost their hot fire. He gestured with a padded hand and, behind him, six trumpeters blasted out their challenge, and his bearded guard struck spears upon their brazen shields.

The people in the amphitheater turned dazedly toward the box, and Aosoka was on his feet.

"The barbarian fought well," he lisped. "To the wizard whose slave he is, and whose spells won this victory, we award the post and honors of the bear, Nasati. Hereafter, Bourtai shall be the official executioner of the bear-throne. It is spoken."

The trumpets blared again and the crowds drew back from where Bourtai stood beside the unconscious Wan Tengri. And Bourtai grinned his shrewd smile and worked a small spell, so that the throng saw him not in his rags but in golden silks, and with fire burning upon his head. From his presence, the crowd backed away and then turned and fled—so that Bourtai stood alone beside the unconscious red giant and the slain bear, and found himself ringed in by bearded spearmen who looked at him over their brazen shields and kept the keen blades turned toward his breast.

"We take you, wizard," the leader growled, "to the abode of Nasati, the bear. but first we will chain this fierce slave of thine."

If Wan Tengri knew of the things that subsequently happened, it was in the character of dreams that mocked his exhausted slumber. Even his giant's strength had been sapped to the point of collapse, and his sleep was own brother to death itself. So that Bourtai, when he had struck off the chains, when he had bathed and anointed his wounds, watched fearfully beside Wan Tengri. The chants and stinking fumes of Bourtai's incantations lifted endlessly above the small white villa that had been the abode of Nasati, the Heaven-Bear, executioner of the Tinsunchi, in the island city of the sea of Buryat which, in the tongue of its people, was known as Byoko.

The time came when Wan Tengri's sleep broke in dreams and through them he heard the angry rasp of Bourtai's shouted threats and the purring softness of a woman answering with a gentleness so full of menace that Wan Tengri stirred and sat bolt upright. He growled at the stiff aching of his body, and the stab of his healing wounds, and then the wonder of the things about him for the moment blotted out the sounds that had awakened him, and he stared in amazement at the abode of Nasati, the bear.

Wan Tengri found that he slept upon a soft couch of silk and that his coverings were silken also, and that his body was naked save for a chain of gold that hung about his neck that ended in a figure in red jade that was shaped like one of those idiotic picture-words he had seen carved and painted upon the ancient Egyptian monuments of Alexandria. As for the room itself, the ceiling was high and rose tinted and, at the windows, arras of rich green cut out the white light of the sun.

The lift of the woman's voice in the next chamber brought his attention back to the thing that had awakened him and Wan Tengri surged to his feet and limped across the room. Where the bear had clawed him, there were great greenish welts rimmed in red and the arrow rips made puckered angry mouths. He swore again as the smooth play of muscles beneath his bronzed skin jerked at torn flesh and, from his leg, a thread of blood traced a twisted scrawl. Wan Tengri thrust aside a green silken curtain and stood against it, glowering at the bitterly gesticulating Bourtai and the woman whose golden hair flowed silken about bare shoulders.

"Throw her out, apeling," Wan Tengri growled. "I have still some sleeping to do."

Bourtai whirled with a glad cry and his monkey eyes were bright, his wry lips twisted in a wide grin. But Wan Tengri's eyes tightened so that fine wrinkles fanned from their corners, and his solid lips drew firm together, for Courtai's garb was of rich brocades and jewels winked from hands and belt, and the hilt of a dagger that was thrust there. Many memories were thrusting back into Wan Tengri's brain, like scraps of a dimly remembered brawl after a night of drinking. He remembered women throwing jewels and gold at his feet, and he thought he could recall that en-

crusted dagger hilt, and the great sunburst of rubies that held the throat of Bourtai's robe.

"So, thou thieving slave," he growled, "you have robbed me while I slept!"

Bourtai spread his hands placatingly and skipped toward him, with a furtive back glance toward the woman. "Nay, master," he whispered, "could thy slave do less than do thee honor? Pay no heed to this woman of the camps. There are a thousand who wish to wed thee and will bring rich doweries and great power! Tomorrow, when you have made your choice, you can be a great murai, a lord of Byoko!"

Over Bourtai's head, Wan Tengri's eyes went to the woman and there was a slow smile on her red mouth and her gaze lingered over the great thews of the red giant's body. He reached out to Bourtai, plucked a bauble from the robe and tossed it to the woman's pink-palmed hand.

"Come back later, woman," he growled. "Now I have some small business with this twisted monkey-creature who boasts he is my slave."

"Nay, she cannot understand thee," Bourtai said slyly. "You must talk to her through me."

The woman's voice drawled out, slow and deep. "I understand well enough," she said, "that you are a liar and a thief, Bourtai. Know, thou mighty one, that this carping wizard claims that it was his spells slew the great Heaven-Bear, and that thou art no more than his brainless ox of a slave. As for this"—the accurately thrown bauble thudded against Wan Tengri's chest—"I am no woman of the camps, but came courting thee honorably. I have yet no husbands, for till you came, in all Byoko, there was no one worthy of Tossa, the Golden!"

SHE TURNED and moved toward the curtained door slowly. Her feet were narrow and white and silver made soft music about her ankles. Wan Tengri grinned and then his deep laughter belled out. "So in Byoko, the women do the courting!" he shouted. "Small wonder a weakling can rule them and that their men are dwarfs! Ha! Now I know that Christos guided me here! This is the land I shall conquer and rule! Ho, thou Tossa of the golden hair, I shall make thee first of my harem!"

"Guard thy tongue, fool!" Bourtai hissed.

Wan Tengri knotted his hand in Bourtai's robe and lifted him from his feet so that the wizard swung dangling before him, "So I am thy slave, thou offensive smell."

There was venom in the black eyes of Bourtai and the dagger flicked from its sheath to press its needlepoint against Wan Tengri. "And likely to be a dead slave," he snarled. "Fool, I saved thy life! Do you think Aosoka will permit so great a warrior free within his city walls? Me, he does not fear, since his magic is greater than mine—and you he will not fear, either, so long as he thinks you under my power! If that woman talks—"

Wan Tengri swore, "If that woman breathes!" Despite the dagger, he shook Bourtai with a slow violence. "Now by Ahriman, small vermin, if you lie to me—"

"Why then," said Bourtai sourly, "we are both dead men!"

Wan Tengri's solid lips stirred in a smile. "Thou art a trickster and a thief, Bourtai, and would cut my throat while I slept if it would profit you. Yet there are times when I think thy shriveled monkey's flesh hides the heart of half a man." He set the small wizard carefully on the floor. "And I can use thy spells and thy tongue. Speak with a true tongue for once in thy verminous life. Who is this woman with the hair of a Megaraean sphinx and the bearing of a princess?"

"I know not thy Megaraean sphinx,"

Bourtai grumbled, readjusting his brocaded robes.

Wan Tengri's eyes were questing over the room and he found piled fruit upon a golden salver, crossed to it with his long, powerful stride. "I need red meat, Bourtai. See to it. Meanwhile—" He stuffed his mouth, and the juice trickled into his beard. "The sphinxes of Megaraca are women of joy, wizard, and all their tresses are dyed yellow by edict of Caesar, lest they mix with honest Roman dames—or so he says. But I think the dames like not the competition. Come, speak out—and truth, mind you, Bourtai, else I forget you have the heart of half a man and cut it out."

Bourtai kept his sour tone but he told Wan Tengri of the order of Aosoka which had made him executioner in the stead of Nasati, the bear. "So we inherit Nasati's wealth, which is the wealth of those he has slain and you can have your pick of the women of Byoko and become a *murai* by the marriage. This Tossa, for all her high talk, is no more than a beggar maid, a woman of the camps."

Wan Tengri grinned, wiping his hands on his thighs. "Nay, and if I wished to enslave myself with a woman, there was the yellow princess of Turgohl. Do then the great ladies here marry slaves? Ho, rat-face, that is it! They must purchase me from my lord, small Bourtai!"

Bourtai shrugged, but his bright eyes were anxious on Wan Tengri's face. "It would gain thee wealth, too, master," he urged. "I warn you, conquest here and thieving will bring only death. The priests have a mighty magic."

Wan Tengri grunted, "There were seven wizards of Kasimer in Turgohl, and they had ten thousand slaves with swords. Who triumphed there?"

"Thee, lord," Bourtai said humbly, "yet on the road to Byoko, a cloud made thee as one dead, and it is one of the least of the magics of Aosoka."

Wan Tengri's heavy brows wrinkled in some small uneasiness, and he took long, restless strides about the room, swearing under his breath at the tug of his wounds. Slave to Bourtai's he would not be, even in name, nor slave to any other living man though he must battle all their magics single-handed. As for these women who came courting men, he would have none of them, though that beggar girl, Tossa, with her golden hair and her princely airs— He ripped aside the green hangings of a window and his eyes tightened to the white sunglare that struck across them. A trumpet sounded distantly.

"The Hour of the Cock," Bourtai murmured behind him. "Best that I go for this red meat you crave."

Wan Tengri grunted for reply. "I've not done with thee, Bourtai. Stay."

His fierce eyes swept the cleared space about this villa of Nasati, the bear. A few trees threw their black shadows against the white wall and, at a spear-throw's distance bearded men with helmet and shield and lance formed a solid line about. Golden Tossa was walking with high-held head through their jeering ranks. He could see the broad avenue of the statues and the palace of Aosoka, and above it was a flash of fiery intensity that would be the thing of magic on the tripod above the pyramid.

Wan Tengri turned impatiently from the window, his eyes still blurred with sunlight—and Bourtai was gone. He swore and took long strides toward the door, yet turned aside. Let the small rat go! There were things which he must think through and he would do better without the thin complaint of that monkey voice in his ears. Everything he saw in this hidden city sharpened his desires for conquest. It was rich, this Byoko, and there was a mighty strength in that red legion when he had mastered it, and the magics of Aosoka.

Wan Tengri went back toward the

window and, in passing, saw that his sword and great bow hung upon the wall nearby. He nodded with satisfaction and reached out to feel the familiar hilt in his strong hand, swung it to gladden his ears with its deadly song. He frowned at the pain that stemmed from his still tormented wrists, but the hampering awkwardness was gone. He was ready for battle and, abruptly, he knew that battle it must be. This rich city— He swept aside the hangings and glowered toward the low, long façade of the palace. Now, by Ahriman, that must be his! Besides—his lips twisted in a slow grin—there was the matter of fulfilling his vow to Christos! The new god had stood by him well there in the arena.

He stood with his broad shoulders holding apart the green silken curtains, the curved sword in his fist and his fierce beard thrust out with the purpose that was hardening his gray hawk's eyes. Already, he was looking upon this city as his—but much fighting lay between. It would not be enough to destroy; he must conquer those wizards and learn their arts. With that help, and from this hidden fastness, he could conquer the plains tribes and even far Turgohl was not beyond his reach. After that, the empire of Chin. In his veins was the blood of Macedonia and of Rome, and of the barbarians of the north. He knew the legends of Alexander, whom the Egyptians made a god, and of Caesar who had conquered a world. But neither of them even dreamed of such riches as lay here under his hand! Wan Tengri laughed softly in his beard and his shaggy head lifted proudly. Of conqueror's blood was he sprung; the ages should sing his conquests. His nostrils arched.

The babble and laughing shouts of the bearded guard whipped his thoughts from Olympus and he peered once more on reality, saw a strange thing in the hot beat of the sunlight before his window. The ring of guards was broken aside and, altogether, they stamped upon the ground, or beat their spear-shafts, and thudded short sword on brazen shields. Through the opening they thus made, fled a woman clothed in fluttering gossamer. Her golden hair streamed and whipped in the wind—and after her bounded lithely the long and powerful form of a snow leopard! Its silvery coat glistened in the sun, and the rosettes were black as the ice-charcoal the men of Chin mined and burned. His red jaws were lolling, and the white slaver of fury was on his long fangs and, yard by yard, he gained upon the fleeing woman!

The woman's face was turned pleadingly toward the window where Wan Tengri stood and he saw that it was the beggar girl who was called Tossa, the Golden. Her voice came to him, thick with terror. "Save me, Amlairic!" she cried. "Oh, save me, thou bear of might!"

Some slight thing about this mad chase like a fragment of a dream raised a strange doubt in Wan Tengri's mind, but the armed guard did nothing but beat encouragement to the beast, now almost upon Tossa. It flashed across his mind that perhaps they worshiped the snow leopard, in addition to the bear. In the Hind, there were great myriads of people who would kill no living thing; not even a snake that threatened the life of their first-born. But this was only a flickering, dying thought in his brain, for Wan Tengri already was in action.

A long leap hurled him through the window. The sword flashed high in the sunlight and a hoarsely terrible shout burst from his throat. For an instant, the snow leopard flinched, its massive head and great amber eyes flicking toward Wan Tengri, then it raced on after Tossa. But the woman had heard his cry and she swerved toward where the red giant stood with the curved sword

of Damascus poised in his hand. With a new strength, she raced ahead of the fangs of the owner and, for the moment, held her own. She darted past Wan Tengri and he sprang directly into the path of the lithe-leaping beast. He poised his sword in a blow that would slice off that feral, deadly head. The blade swept down—and rasped on steel that sang as fiercely as his own.

Wan Tengri swore in amazement, leaped backward a full stride to try again as the beast gathered its hind-quarters for a pouncing charge—and suddenly, it was no snow leopard he faced at all, but a warrior of the red legion! The man wore an iron helmet upon his head and about it was twined the silken tail of a snow leopard and the visor was fierce with the beast's fangs. And there was a snarl of hatred upon the man's face that matched with the slaver of the vanished ounce.

Wan Tengri knew that once more he was face to face with enchantment, but his sword was on guard before his naked chest, and the steel hissed sweetly through the air. And before him was the red warrior who, on a night when he swung helpless from a pole, had struck him in the teeth! And Wan Tengri uttered a great bellow of a laugh and made his sword sing shrilly in a great circle about his head.

"Thou imitation beast!" he shouted. "Remember this, when you meet your foul gods! Prester John told thee that he would remember!"

With the words, he sprang fiercely to the attack, but the leopard man dodged lithely aside—and Prester John's wounded leg flexed beneath him, made him stumble. He saw the triumphant snarl upon the man's helmeted face, saw the great two-handed sword swinging downward in a slash that must split his skull like a rotten melon!

Wan Tengri was not a man who thought in battle. His body and brain worked together in an amalgam of action that was as effortless as the continued breath of the hurricane for which he had been named. Even as he dropped to his knee, he had weighed the values. His good steel might ward the blow, but it was not a thing to gamble upon. The curved blade which had swept so viciously downward at the side-leaping warrior whirled and flicked upward with scarcely less force, but with the biting slash for which its curve had been wrought. It seemed barely to caress the stout forearms that were sweeping the heavy straight sword down upon his skull, but the blade lost direction. It turned in the air and the hilt shot upward as the point slanted toward the earth behind Wan Tengri. He caught the flat of the blade across his shoulders and even that drove the breath from his stretching nostrils in a whistling grunt. The point of the heavy straight sword drove into the earth and it quivered there. For an instant after it struck, the hands of the red warrior still gripped the hilt, then they loosened and fell to the earth—for those hands were no longer attached to their owner's body.

The leopard warrior in the leopard helm stared stupidly at his quivering sword. He stumbled past Wan Tengri and stooped toward the fallen hands. It was only when the warrior reached out for them that he became aware of the stumps of his arms from which the blood spurted in bright crimson streams to the dusty earth. He screamed then and ran with his shortened arms flung high above his head. Wan Tengri, with a fierce shout, hurled the severed hands after him. When the man fell he did not stir again, for he had run out the convulsions of his death.

THERE WAS a heavy frown on the broad forehead of Wan Tengri as he turned toward where the woman, Tossa, huddled against the white wall of his house. She smiled at him timidly. She came forward and dropped on her knees

to kiss his dusty, naked foot. Still frowning, Wan Tengri reached down to draw her erect before him so that he might question her, and the smile on her lips became joyous, and she threw her arms about his neck.

"Truly," she whispered, "you are a great and noble man, my husband."

Wan Tengri growled in his chest. "There are things and enchantments here I do not understand and— By the gold-plated tusks of Ahriman, *what did you call me?*"

"My husband," said Tossa, and she trembled and dropped her eyes demurely.

"Don't jest with me, woman," said Wan Tengri softly. "This steel can cut a soft throat, too!"

Tossa shrank back from him, but her blue eyes lifted liquidly to his. "Nay, I do not jest, great Amlairic. Thou hast won me by right of capture and of battle, according to the laws and customs of Byoko, by which I must be either thy slave or thy wife. I did kiss thy feet in slavery, and you, most noble of men, you did lift me to thy arms as thy wife!"

Wan Tengri swore and strode up and down fiercely. He glared toward where the bearded men of Byoko were laughing, yet respectfully, for the corpse of the leopard warrior lay at their feet. And Wan Tengri gestured savagely toward the house.

"Get inside there, woman," he said roughly. "There will be a way out of this trickery!"

But Tossa smiled and dropped her eyes demurely. "I will go where thou biddest me, my husband," she said gently. "But I had not thought yet to come to my marriage bed."

And she turned and walked with her downcast eyes toward the entrance of the house that had been the abode of Nasati, the bear, and now was the abode of Prester John. And Wan Tengri strangled his curses, but could not smother the groan that came afterward.

"Christos, send that screw-faced ape of mine back swiftly," he muttered. "Damn thy black soul to hell, Bourtai, where are you?"

And then, because the bearded men were eying him curiously, and because there was nothing else he could think to do for that futile rage burned in his brain, Wan Tengri wiped his sword dry on his thigh, and fumbled it for a while. And then he went inside the house where Tossa, his beggar bride, but withal a very beautiful bride, awaited him. He hung his sword on the wall. And Bourtai did not return. And time passed—and Bourtai did not return.

VI.

Wan Tengri stretched his giant's body at ease upon his silken couch and listened in drowsiness and a vast content while Tossa murmured to him and combed the tangles from his fierce beard—from the fiery mane of his hair.

"Thou art indeed a man of might, my lord, as I was told," said Tossa. "There is nothing you cannot do, my lord, no great deed you cannot dare—and yet you are kind to the beggar girl who is thy . . thy wife."

Wan Tengri's solid lips relaxed in a smile and he opened his gray eyes a little to look up into the flushed face above him. "Oh, you're all right," he mumbled. "It was only that I thought you had tricked me. I am not a gentle man when tricked!"

"Oh, my lord, I would not dare to trick thee!" Tossa's blue eyes opened very wide.

"And therein you are wise, Tossa. Fetch me food."

Tossa rose lithely to her feet and Wan Tengri watched the grace of her movements with lazy pleasure.

"Nay," she said, "I am not wise. I am but an ignorant beggar girl, but I am glad to have pleased my lord." She hesitated, stooping toward him. "Will I

still please you, mighty Amlairic, when you have risen in power. When you have become . yes, I think you might even become a *murai* of Byoko! You could aspire that high."

Wan Tengri frowned, "A mere lord of Byoko? So that is all you think of me?" He swung his feet heavily to the floor, reached out his blunt fingers to knot into a fist like a maul. "I hold Byoko like that, in the hollow of my hand. When I please, I shall sweep Aosoka from his throne—"

"Oh, softly, my lord! Softly! Dare not to speak so of the Grandson of Heaven! Even thou canst not so dare!"

"Dare!" A roar rumbled in Wan Tengri's throat. "I will stir the red legion to revolt and give the city to sack! As for this Aosoka, I will snip off his head!"

Tossa flung herself into Wan Tengri's arms. "Oh, I know, my lord, that thy soft heart has been touched by the fate of thy kinsmen, the Tokhari—

"Well, there is that," Wan Tengri assented. "The loot means little."

"Pray, my lord, speak more softly. The priests have long ears!"

"The ears of asses!" said Wan Tengri.

"The magic of Aosoka—"

"My magic will spit upon his, when I am ready!"

"Oh, be merciful, my lord!" Tossa dropped upon her knees, her palms pleading upon his thighs. "If the priests take thee, my lot will be—awful. I tell thee truth, my lord. Bend close that I may whisper."

"Speak it out!" But Wan Tengri bent closer to her, and his eyes flicked, frowning, toward the portiered windows and door. Tossa's breath tingled against his ear, and his blunt fingers wound into her golden tresses.

"The priests of the long ears," she whispered, "hear all things, even through walls of stone; and the burning glass upon the pyramid in the palace court will tell Aosoka where trouble lies. The blood-red bear Aosoka wears upon his brow gives him to swallow all wisdom when he places it in his mouth! And all men who look into Aosoka's eyes, aye, and all women, too, must do whatever he bids!"

"Lies, all lies to frighten slaves," Wan Tengri said uneasily.

"Nay, lord, thy magic is great—but the magic of Aosoka is greater!"

Wan Tengri flung the girl from him, took great strides across the silk-hung chamber. "Now by the body of Christos, this Aosoka—"

Tossa uttered a small scream. "Oh, I pray you!"

Wan Tengri glanced sharply toward the curtained window where the silks seemed briefly to sway. He bounded toward it and his hand tore the curved sword from the wall—but when he swept aside the soft green drapes, there was nothing visible; nothing save the bearded guards at a distance and the white-hot beat of the sun. He crossed back to Tossa with long, flexed strides and the sword still glittered in his fist.

"I will tell thee a thing that is in my heart," he said, and he curbed his grumbling voice. "I do not think Aosoka's magic is great, but if it is, then I have a greater! This bauble"—and he struck his fist upon the bit of the True Cross so that his chest boomed like a drum of wood—"this magic amulet will conquer all his magic. Who owns it and believes—nay, these ears and long-seeing eyes are naught but falsehoods to scare slaves!"

There was a curious gleam in the blue eyes of Tossa as she looked at the bit of silk-wrapped wood about Wan Tengri's neck, but she hid the look quickly, and when she rose to stand close against the red giant, her eyes were limpid with concern, with worship.

"You know all things, my lord," she said humbly, "yet not all these things

could be lies. Look you, when you escaped so easily the devils of the high grass, did not the devil scream? And afterward, did not the red legion come swiftly to take thee?"

A scowl darkened Wan Tengri's brow. "Aye, he screamed right enough."

"And when you did slay the Tinsunchi upon the Road of Heaven, did not one of them scream—and afterward came the Heaven-Bear himself, roaring, and you fell as one dead?"

Wan Tengri's sword swung restlessly at his side. He swung his head from side to side, and he was like a great bear, baited. "It is as you say, yet how could you know these things?"

"All Byoko knows them, lord," Tossa whispered, "for the priest of the ears heard the scream and Aosoka asked of the burning glass what was happening, and it told him of things a day's march away upon the Road of Heaven."

Wan Tengri swore and there was worry in his frowning eyes. He was remembering the scream that had made his ears ache after it had ceased to sound, and the quickness with which help had come in answer to it. By Ahriman, it must have been in answer! And how else could Aosoka have known these things save by magic? Wan Tengri swore again and, afterward, he laughed, but not with a full throat.

"I and my bauble have overcome greater enchantments," he said roughly, "and I do not fear your Aosoka, nor your ass-eared priests." He checked his pacing, and grinned. "If Aosoka knows all this, then he knows, too, that I mean to render his soft fat from his bones and take his city."

"It may well be, my lord. Indeed, I think it certain!"

Wan Tengri threw back his head and laughed, and the walls vibrated with it. "Then, mark you, Tossa, Aosoka fears me! Else would he have slain me long ago! My magic is greater than his!"

THE CLASH of a sword on shield sent its brazen summons through the room and Wan Tengri whirled, the sword ready in his hand. Behind him, Tossa slipped a dagger from a hidden sheath and masked it against her thigh and her eyes were quick and shining. She moved softly closer to Wan Tengri.

"Mayhap they come to slay now, master," she whispered. "Well, may they fear thy might—and yet I do not think that is why they have delayed."

Wan Tengri growled in his throat, but made no other answer, and the brazen summons clanged again and Tossa spoke on, rapidly.

"I think they delayed," she said, "for that they wish to learn your great magic that could conquer the grass-devils; that could slay the Tinsunchi upon the road; that only the great Heaven-Bear himself could conquer! Aosoka is wise in such matters, since he has sucked all truth from the blood-red bear. If one may do such things, then many others might also—and Byoko is no longer safe! Guard thy secrets well, master, if they come not to slay thee now. Do not even dream of them at night, lest the magic of Aosoka tear them from thy brain!"

Wan Tengri lifted his hand to press the bit of the True Cross, and went toward the door, striding, so that Tossa was left alone in the middle of the chamber. For an instant she watched him with her gleaming eyes—but Wan Tengri swept aside the curtains of the door and narrowed his gaze against the lance-points of sunlight. Before him knelt a woman and behind her four children bowed their foreheads to the dust. And the women held in her hands a helmet wound about with the tail of a snow leopard. Relief flooded Wan Tengri so that his muscles loosened, but his eyes shot fiercely beyond the woman to the ring of bearded guards. They did not threaten. *Phagh!* This Tossa had worked on his apprehensions until they

Swiftly, Wan Tengri sliced at the "magic ears" of the guardian priest—

made him a jackal for fright. But it was in love she had spoken, of course. She feared for his safety. Let Aosoka look to it!

Wan Tengri's shoulders swayed stiffly as he moved soft-footed toward the kneeling woman. He thrust the sword through the golden sash that bound the

soft green of the silken robe.

"Now then, woman," he growled, "what's the meaning of this mummery?"

The woman lifted her face, and the rich red hair streamed across it, and there was dust on her forehead and the redness of weeping in his eyes.

"To the conqueror, the spoils," she said thickly. "I am Hildaic, whose man you slew this day, and these are his sons—thy slaves now."

Wan Tengri frowned at the woman's head, bowed again, and he swore in his throat. Slaves were well enough, but he wanted no hostile spies about him just now. There was work to be done, and battle to be fought, and this woman and her sons—. He caught the hostile glare of a half-grown boy's eyes that met his, undaunted. Something like a grin twitched at Wan Tengri's lips and his eyes tautened in a momentary hint of shrewdness.

"I like not this talk of slavery," he said harshly. "A man may slay a kinsman in a righteous quarrel; but no warrior may enslave a kinsman's widow and his orphans. Go thou to Visimar and bear him this message from Amlairic, as brother greets brother." He twisted his head about to see how Tossa took his gesture, but her eyes were on the ground. Wan Tengri frowned, and spoke to her roughly, "Fetch the golden salver from the table, woman!"

Tossa turned without word and when she returned, Wan Tengri lifted the widowed Hildaic to her feet and placed the salver in her hands.

"Accept this gift and, with it thy freedom, Hildaic, kinswoman," he said gently. "Now go."

He swung about and his shoulders rolled with perceptible swagger as he went in through the doorway. Behind him, the woman's voice lifted in gratitude and in praise.

Tossa said humbly. "Thou are a great and generous lord—and give freely of thy great wealth."

Wan Tengri looked toward her sharply, but Tossa's eyes remained on the floor—and Wan Tengri glowered about the apartment, from which Bourtai already had stripped everything of value save the salver, which had come lately. His face began to burn.

"You shall see how generous I can be," he said gruffly, "when I have sacked Byoko."

"I shall wait," Tossa murmured and turned away. "I go to find the food my lord ordered."

She vanished into another apartment and Wan Tengri stood staring where the curtains swayed, and muttered curses into his beard. But Tossa was too humble and loving to mock him. He was almost sure she was.

It was while he still stood so that he heard the clatter of flopping sandals as someone ran across the hard earth outside, and Bourtai staggered in through the curtains, panting, and darted toward him with both clawed, dirty hands reaching out in appeal.

Wan Tengri grinned and felt confidence filling him again. "So hast been caught cutting purses, eh thief? Will thy monkey hands never learn wisdom?"

"A priest," gasped Bourtai. "A long-eared priest—"

"Was it a rich purse, apeling?"

Bourtai swallowed convulsively, stilled the shuddering that shook all his body and his voice came out, thin and high and breathless. "The priest overheard your boasting, fool! He has taken it to Aosoka!"

Wan Tengri hunched his shoulders heavily and his hand glided toward his sword hilt. "Nay," he grumbled, "it does not matter. Since all things are known to Aosoka, the priest can take him no new thing."

"They can take to Aosoka thy fat head!" Anger made Bourtai's voice shrill, but it broke to a frightened whine as Wan Tengri's hand twisted into the

brocades of his rich robe and lifted him, and shook him briefly.

"Keep a civil tongue between thy teeth, wizard, or you'll lack the teeth for the job! Now again, and slowly, what threatens?"

But even as Bourtai began his whining recital, there came another sound which blotted out his words. Not that it was loud, but it was a sound that could make the very earth shiver. Steadily, inexorably, it came, the tread of marching men. Wan Tengri flung Bourtai from him and heard the small twisted wizard whimpering with his fright; heard presently the whisper of Tossa's naked foot beside him.

"Thy food, master," she said.

Without looking toward her, Wan Tengri took the food and stuffed it into his mouth. The champ of his thick-muscled jaws sped his thinking and he turned no more than an absent frown when he heard the voices of Bourtai and Tossa lift in sharp debate. Two things were possible in this new attack Aosoka launched upon him: either the priest actually had heard his insults and they had stirred Aosoka to anger; or the marchers were come once more to try the magic of grass-devil and Tinsunchi upon him. The magic of the whip and of their flying arrows he did not fear particularly, but this grass-devil fog was another matter. Against it he had no defense and he had no wish to fall to earth without a blow struck, eyes and tongue straining from their roots under the strangulation that needed no bowstring about his throat!

It might be the better part of valor to flee now, while only this thin ring of bearded guards surrounded his home! Wan Tengri growled an oath in his throat, dried his food-greased hand on his silken robe, and his eyes went longingly toward his bow. They had been careful to give him no arrows for it, by Ahriman! Yet there was his sword. His hand touched the hilt, cunningly designed to the grasp of his giant's fist.

"Oh, you are a great fool!" Bourtai was whining at his elbow. "This beggar girl is neither Tokhari nor Tinsunchi, but an outcast from both. If you must take a woman, why not one of these I picked for thee? Wealth, they would have brought, and powerful friends! It was because these women wanted thee that Aosoka withheld his hand. Yet you choose a beggar-maid, no doubt with as many husbands as there are soldiers in camp will have her—"

Tossa sprung upon him with a flashing dagger and Wan Tengri barely blocked her with a heavy arm thrown about her body. She twisted against the restraint, trying to get at the shrinking Bourtai with her knife, and Wan Tengri was conscious of the crawl of her silks against firm lithe flesh.

"My lord, he lies!" she cried. "You know if I had ever another husband before thee!"

"There is this blond stripling, Thanamund," Bourtai snarled, and a dagger was in his own fist.

"He is my brother, lord!"

Wan Tengri's solid lips stirred in smiling. "It is a matter that can wait," he said. "The girl pleases me, apeling, that is all you need to know. Do the two of you brawl here until I come back to set Tossa beside the throne of Aosoka!" He chuckled, thrust Tossa back and combed blunt fingers through his beard, smooth from Tossa's combing. "Be a good monkey, Bourtai, and perhaps I will let thee chatter words of your fancied wisdom in my ear—then."

He turned his back upon them and strode, soft-footed, toward the curtain. As he went, he stripped the silks from his thick shoulders so that they hung on his golden sash. His beard and hair, rumpled by quick thrusts of his hands, stood out like fierce wires of drawn copper. As he brushed aside the curtains, the sword in his fist caught a blaze of sunlight, and he began to sing raucously.

The curtain swung shut with a thin silken whisper, stirred a while and was still. Tossa turned her blue eyes upon Bourtai and they were hot with anger.

"So you attempt treachery, Bourtai?" It was a whisper.

"He is worth nothing to us dead!" Bourtai said sullenly. "Naught makes him fight like anger. That was all I sought! What were you thinking of, to make him boast? It is a thing Aosoka will not tolerate."

Tossa smiled. sleepily as a cat, and toyed with her dagger.

"I but cemented his purpose to seize the throne," she said softly, "and his magic will take him through this battle unscathed. Hark ye, Bourtai, I will accept no dictation and no slander from thee! One thing I promised, and it shall be thine for faithfulness—Aosoka's ruby of wisdom! Beware lest I leave thee no tongue with which to feel its wisdom—and no mouth to put it in! Now, let us see what this champion of ours accomplishes!"

Bourtai was shivering though there was hatred in the black glitter of his eyes. He bowed his body slavishly.

"Yes, Highness," he murmured, and there was a secret sly smile on his mouth as Tossa turned her haughty back upon him.

Outside, in the white beat of the sunshine, Wan Tengri marched steadily toward the circle of bearded guards, his shoulders swinging broadly to the rhythm of the marching song he chanted. And as he walked, he tossed his sword high into the air, so that it whirled in a brilliant pinwheel of flame to fall, hilt-first, into his fist. He did that again and again.

"Ho, guard!" he cried, and he spoke the language of the Tokhari. "Ho, my feeble dwarfs, Aosoka hath sent for his executioner! No doubt to lop off a few of thy bearded heads! Form up there; form up! Shall Nasati, the bear, go before his lord without an escort? *Form up!*"

Bearded, fierce small faces glared toward him, and heavy brows wrinkled in puzzlement, but one whose armored shield held great ornate bosses that built together a walking bear, strode forward from the rest and answered haltingly in the tongue Wan Tengri spoke.

"We have no word, Nasati!"

"You have mine!" Wan Tengri growled. "Did you not see from Bourtai's haste how urgent was the summons? Form up—or shall I report to Aosoka that his captain refuses his orders?" He tossed his sword high into the air again, and the captain's eyes followed it, flinchingly. But Wan Tengri stepped forward and set his blunt fingers about the man's throat, and the sword flashed down behind him to bury its singing point in the hard earth. Wan Tengri tossed the man backward a full four cubits.

"Do you refuse your orders, fool?" Wan Tengri rasped. "Form up my guard! March with me to the palace of Aosoka!" His hand speared behind him to the hilt of his sword and he swung it restlessly, hungrily at his side.

Hatred grinned on the captain's mouth as he picked himself dustily up from the earth. "It is well," he hissed. "Those who go to Aosoka without summons never need that summons again—and either way, thy fate will be sweet in my mouth!"

Wan Tengri's solid lips moved back from his teeth and he was well pleased. These dogs were easily cowed by a show of authority—especially since they believed him a great magician. He struck the captain carelessly across the mouth with loose knuckles, and the red blood sprang out in answer.

"So a slave sneers at Aosoka?" he asked, ominously. "I shall see how Aosoka takes to this criticism from a slave!"

The blood stood out brightly against

the captain's whitening lips, ran slow droplets over the stiff, individual hairs of his beard, and there was real fright now. "Nay, I do but praise Aosoka," he muttered. "He is great and merciful and fearless. He yes, I form your guard at once!"

He turned and chattered at the curious-staring spearmen in the monkey tongue of the Tinsunchi and they formed double ranks to each side and before and behind Wan Tengri, and they swung off toward the sound of tramping legion feet, and slashing sword that filled all the air with its nearness. Wan Tengri's keen eyes stabbed ahead toward the junction of crooked streets where the two forces of men would meet. It was narrow and would be close-crowded by armed men; too crowded for bow-work. If it came to that, his sweetly curved Damascus steel could reap a fearful harvest there. Wan Tengri laughed and bellowed out once more his marching song, stretching his powerful legs so that the little bearded men must trot to keep the pace. And he flung his glittering sword again into the high air, so that it seemed another blazing sun, whirling, whirling—

"Now you spirits of the high air," chanted Wan Tengri, "thou *tengri* who are my father and my mother, winds of the hurricane, enter my steel to make it swift as thy lightnings and more deadly! Breathe upon it, my mother and my father, that I may have thy blessing and thy strong magic!"

Wan Tengri had more room about him after that. Ahead of him, the first men of the guard were rounding the corner of the crooked street and they shouted in their hoarse, edged voices, sharp explosive sounds like curses. The captain's neck stiffened and he ran swiftly forward—and Wan Tengri did not check his pace.

"Forward!" he shouted deeply. "Forward to the palace of Aosoka, for my master, Aosoka, has summoned me!"

Voices lifted in brawling, and the progress of his guard was checked and Wan Tengri strode forward, brushing aside small stubborn men from his path. The crowd pressed closer about him, and laughter rumbled in Wan Tengri's chest. If it was to be battle—

He rounded the curve, a great galley plowing among small, piratical craft, head and shoulders above the Tinsunchi spearmen, and beheld a red legion blocking all the street ahead.

"Ho, there, Visimar!" he shouted.

An iron-armored man who wore the boss of the Bear upon his helmet stepped forward. "Visimar is not here," he growled. "I, Mardoric, command."

"Then get your slaves from my path!" Wan Tengri thundered. "I go to answer the summons of my master, Aosoka! Forward, my guard! Brush these slaves from your way!"

Mardoric's face darkened with blood, but Wan Tengri was striding toward him, and the little spearmen were thrusting forward the long glittering points of their lances.

"Thou, Mardoric," Wan Tengri threw at him. "Fall in your red legion behind my guard, if you have business with me. It can wait until I have answered the summons of Aosoka! Delay me at your peril!"

He was face to face with the front ranks of the legion, who stood shield to shield across the street, but as yet they held no swords in their hands. There had been no order, and Mardoric delayed.

"Split!" Wan Tengri spat out the order in the tone he knew so well, having heard it so many times at the Circus in Alexandria. "Split, and line the walls in double ranks. Salute, slaves! Salute Nasati the bear! Salute the executioner of Aosoka, who this day becomes *murai!*"

For an instant, hard, blue, wary eyes met his, and taut hands moved toward

sword hilts, but Wan Tengri spun his own blade into the air and laughed—and began to march. Mardoric echoed his command sullenly, and the legion divided itself against the walls and afterward swung in behind the guard of Tinsunchi. And Wan Tengri kept his place ahead of the marching men.

"Mardoric!" Wan Tengri shouted. "To my side! A *murai* orders it!"

There was a delay and then Mardoric rotted up beside Wan Tengri with his drawn sword aswing across his chest.

"There is no dispute here," Wan Tengri told him calmly. "You came to summon me before Aosoka, and before Aosoka I go. Where is Visimar?"

Mardoric's face was stern and hard under the metallic rim of his helmet. Red hair swung about his shoulders, but it could not rival the fierce brightness of the mane of Wan Tengri.

"Visimar is under guard in his tent," Mardoric answered shortly. "He will receive a hundred lashes for each of the Tinsunchi killed under his charge, and each tenth man of his legion will die—if thou canst kill them, Amlairic, *murai*."

Wan Tengri laughed and his eyes glowed with hidden fires. "Why, that is as may be, Mardoric, and as the spirits of the high air will it. Rejoin thy men."

There was a fiercer surging of Wan Tengri's pulses and his shoulders thrust forward more eagerly as he strode on ahead of the guard. He had hoped that Visimar might be on guard at the palace, but perhaps this was better. A man sentenced to be lashed to death, and those others who were to die beneath the sword, would make eager allies. For it was plain that Bourtai had spoken truth; Aosoka had sent the red legion to kill him. No summons to duty would have needed so many grim men! It was not the day nor the hour Wan Tengri would have chosen, but before the trumpets sounded again to proclaim the Hour of the Ape, Wan Tengri would be Emperor of Byoko, of the Tinsunchi and the Tokhari—or Wan Tengri would be dead!

"And," Wan Tengri muttered in his beard, "I think I shall not die before I mount Aosoka's throne. I think I shall know when the sands of my life are running low. *Ahi!* I never felt more alive, or less likely for death—that is, my own death!"

He spun the sword flashingly aloft again, and roared out his deep laughter at his own grim jest—and they came to the steps of the palace of Aosoka. And a red-robed priest with long golden ears affixed to his skull so that his face was scarcely visible, stepped into the middle of the broad doorway and pointed an accusing hand at Wan Tengri.

"Disarm and slay that man," he thundered. "I heard him, and he plots the death of Aosoka! *I heard him!*"

VII.

An instant, Wan Tengri glared toward the accusing priest, seeing the small, venomous face between those great, upthrusting ears. Wan Tengri felt the stir of anger that was ever the spur that fear lent to his stout heart. Heard him, had this accursed priest? Heard him when he muttered too low for the men two paces behind to catch his words? To Ahriman, with their accursed magic! Prester John had a greater!

"So you heard me!" Wan Tengri roared, and before there had even been an answering shout from the Tinsunchi behind him, he sprang up the steps with great elastic strides so that his feet seemed only to skim the glistening white marble. "So you heard me! It is the last thing thou shalt hear with thy asses' ears!"

The sword in Wan Tengri's fist whirled from the wrist and made two flashing circles, one on each side of the priest's shaven poll! A thin scream

lifted from the priest's black-toothed mouth and he turned and fled with both hands fluttering high in the air, and the darkness of the palace corridor swallowed him—but he was without any ears at all and the eager red spurted from each side of his naked skull! Wan Tengri stooped and caught up the golden ears from where they had fallen, and saw the shorn flesh within their sockets—and he thrust them inside his girdle so that they pressed their smooth, metallic faces warm against the plated muscles of his body as he faced toward the Tinsunchi, and the red legion behind them.

"I hear thee, with my magic," Wan Tengri mocked them. "I hear the cowardly whispering of thy hearts! They are saying that surely this is no mere man who can notch the magic ears, and you are right. This day I rule in Byoko—and who opposes me shall die, for look you"—and he waggled his hands beside his head like great ears while the sword beneath his arm dropped slow red driblets on the white marble—"I can hear your hearts, and I know."

Wan Tengri laughed and leaped backward, and under the urging of his weighty shoulders, brazen doors swung shut across the entrance of the palace. Outside, the wail of the Tinsunchi and the battle shout of the legion lifted. A spear clanged against the brazen door and the reverberations marched ahead along the corridor, and a swift sped arrow just put its iron tip through the metal barrier. Wan Tengri dropped a great bar into the sockets that bound the brazen doors shut, and he raced on through the antechamber where a prince's ransom in the furs of the *rondes* draped the walls; and across the court of the perfumed fountains where the white pyramid bore its slim column with the golden ladder. The magic glass upon its crest winked a blinding eye toward Wan Tengri's swift glance.

"Presently," Wan Tengri muttered. "Presently, I shall be back for thee, my beauty! There is another treasure I crave!"

He bounded across the court, and his nostrils drank deep of the spiced aroma of fountains and the coolth of growing things. This, all this would be his presently, when he had done a bit more killing! He sprang into the corridor where once before he had been dragged, helpless as a drawn deer upon a spit, and his eyes quested about restlessly. From the darkness, a spearpoint caught a glint of light as it leaped toward his breast! Wan Tengri's curved sword slashed the air in precise, careless timing, and the spearpoint leapt from the shaft and the wooden stave, slanting aside, thudded glancingly across his chest. It made a low, deep booming sound and Wan Tengri laughed.

"Your spears glance from my magic, fools!" he bellowed. "Throw down your weapons and flee—flee from the wrath of the new ruler of Byoko!"

Now, a dark curtain whipped aside from the corridor ahead and there were two ranks of archers, one kneeling and one standing, with arrows drawn till the heads snugged against the bow. A word of command cracked, and the bows twanged all together, a vicious lethal chorus. They delayed an instant too long. Wan Tengri hit the floor, rolling, even as the command snapped out and the arrows snarled overhead, so that before the archers could notch a second arrow, he was up among their close-packed ranks—and the swift sword beat time to Wan Tengri's bellowed curses and his deep laughter, and its glitter swiftly dimmed and became an ominous dark flail in the darkness; the sword of an angel of death.

Some men lived through the hurricane that swept over them, and they fled screaming along the corridors and their voices lifted wails of woe and despair. Wan Tengri stood among the strewn,

twisted bodies of the slain, and his bowed great shoulders were splashed with blood that was not his own—and before him were the brazen doors of the throne room. His sword arm was flexed and the curbed tip pointed the way he must go. He went that way, and the brazen doors resisted his thrust. A fury seized on Wan Tengri, and he set his bunched shoulders against their middle, and his bare feet gripped the marble pavement. There was sweat upon his body so that he gleamed like a man of metal, of bronze and brass and tempered steel. The doors creaked; the strong doors groaned and there was a sharp explosion and the straps that held the locking bar burst their rivets. The bar fell to the floor with a sullen clang and the heavy doors swung fiercely inward to jar against walls of stone. They filled the long throne-room with a brazen challenge like the beat of sword upon a god's shield.

Wan Tengri stood upon the threshold and lifted his panting chest, and thrust his sword straight forward toward the throne.

"Yield you now, Aosoka!" he cried, and his voice boomed through the emptiness. "Yield you now to the mercy of Wan Tengri, lest that mercy be withdrawn!"

He could see Aosoka clearly upon the throne, could see the semicircle of flanking spear guards and the three robed priests behind—but one of the priests had bleeding stubs where his ears had been and Wan Tengri could feel that there was fear beneath the bear-mask and the serpent-mask that hid the faces of the other two. Aosoka lounged upon the golden throne and fingered his oiled locks, and the smile upon his lips was a carmined smear. Wan Tengri moved forward, one slow portentous foot before the other, and the muscles rippled upon his trunk, and the drag of the pale green robe only half-masked the lithe power of his legs. He saw now why Aosoka could smile. The curtain of golden gauze draped between him and the menace of the red barbarian's sword. Behind the gauze, the armed men of the guard had not troubled to set their spears forward. Wan Tengri's lips curled back from his teeth. So it was magic he must fight! To Ahriman's burning hell with their accursed magic!

Wan Tengri shouted and leaped forward, lured by the hateful mockery of Aosoka's smile, and he lifted his mighty body high and set his mighty shoulders to tear down that golden gauze. His sword reached to slit it and—he clamped the blunt fingers of his left hand upon the thin magic barrier. And where his sword touched, spurts of white-blue fire shot from the gauze so that his keen steel was driven from his grip, but his left hand welded to the gauze. A cry of rage and pain and, perhaps, something of fear, tore from his throat. He tried to wrench his hand free of the mesh, and the muscles writhed and leaped in his arm and seemed, of their own will, to tighten their hold!

Heat raced along that arm, and an agony, so that he danced there before the magic curtain that shielded the throne of Aosoka, and a lesser man than Prester John would have screamed in the madness of his torture and his terror and would have died under the magic of the Tinsunchi. Darkness and hell swirled in his skull; his brain was splitting, and his head wrenched back between his shoulder blades, his lips writhing apart in a silent scream. *Christos!* And this was why Aosoka had smiled.

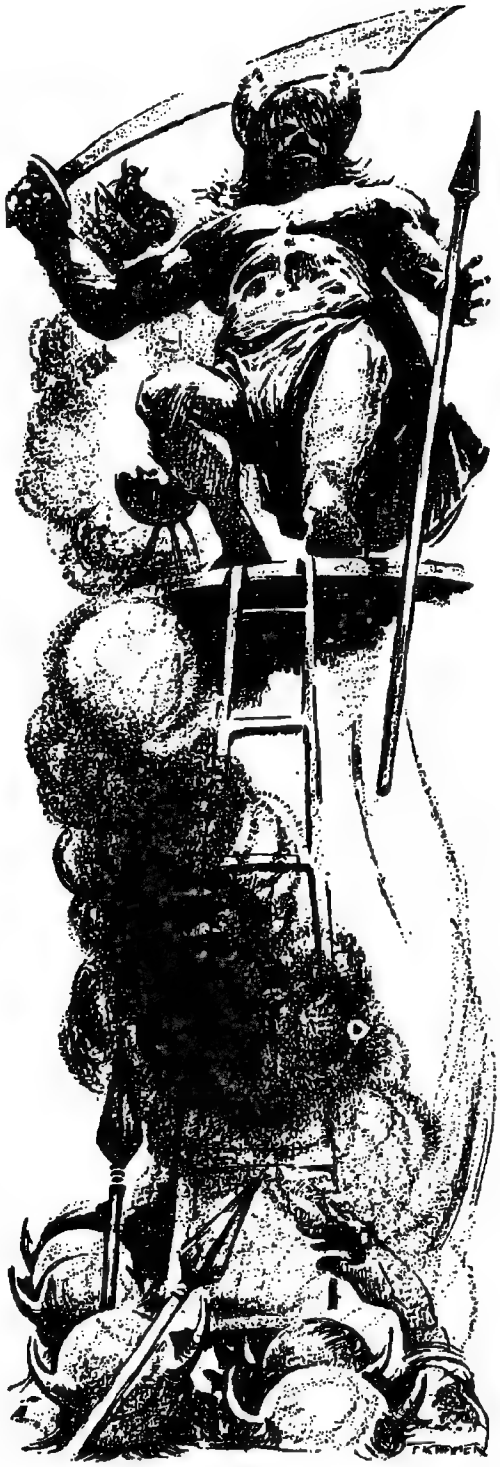
It was the floating mockery of that smile before his dimming eyes that twisted the hot sword of fury in Wan Tengri's vitals. He screamed then, but it was in defiance, and the hoarse animal rage that shook him more violently than this magic of white-hot fire which turned his muscles against his brain.

The magic made him grip tighter upon the mesh. Well, he would make it squeal beneath his grip! His chest arched, straining with the deep sucking of breath through flaring nostrils. The stench of his own burning flesh maddened him. Fiercely, savagely, as a dog shakes a serpent, he wrenched at the golden fabric. The flat ropes of muscle writhed upon his shoulders and, a little, the curtain gave.

White sparks leaped out fiercely where it tore loose from the ceiling, as if the spirits that ruled this murderous thing protested at the havoc Wan Tengri wrought. He shouted his brazen-throated defiance of the leaping flames, and it seemed to him that the pain and the heat abated by a little.

He flung his whole heavy body, the full might of his muscles into a final savage wrenching—and there was a tearing high scream of parting fabric. With a final, ripping discharge of fire, the gauze came free in his hands and settled toward him. But Wan Tengri whirled it about his head as in the arena, a *retarius* swings his weighted net over a rival gladiator, and Wan Tengri flung it directly at the throne of Aosoka! A single leap carried him to where his sword had fallen, and he bounded after the cast of the golden net.

Wan Tengri could see the net closing down over Aosoka's head, over his throne, but the king and his bear-throne of gold, offered no obstacle to the mesh. It settled flat upon the floor with a soft, metallic whispering—and Wan Tengri saw that—for all he could still see Aosoka and his ring of mocking guards—he was alone in the great throne-room of Byoko! Alone—and swaying with the exhaustion of his struggle against this mighty magic. The heat and the torture had drained him, and his sweat made burned streaks along his sides; the smell of his scorched flesh was nauseous to his arched nostrils. His chest heaved—but coolness sat in his fevered brain.



Wan Tengri's sword flashed out to halve the flying javelin.

He realized that what he gazed upon was a mirage of Aosoka upon his throne. He had seen such things upon the Kara-Korum, the desert of the Black Sands, and before that among the pyramids of Egypt, but this was made by man. It was reflected there in a mirror of such clarity as Wan Tengri had never seen before. But somewhere near, Aosoka was waiting. Somewhere—

WITH A SHOUT of fury, Wan Tengri leaped toward the mirage and his sword struck fiercely. The blade quivered with a high, musical note, ringing on stone, and about his feet fell the shattered figures of the mirage. It burst into a thousand glittering shards, like a broken crystal globe, like a precious wine cup of glass—and where Aosoka had appeared to sit, there was only a space of sullen stone, framed in the jagged points of the breach Wan Tengri had made in the mirage-wall.

While Wan Tengri stared, weakened and a little bewildered at the wreckage of his bold assault, swaying with the pain of his burns and the mounting fatigue of great muscles too torturously tried, he heard the whine of swiftly opened doors and the rush of swift, marching feet. And he gripped the sword more fiercely in his fist, and spat upon the seared flesh of his left palm, so that it could grip a dagger. He turned heavily, and set his shoulders against the wall of stone. There was a dogged rage in his dulled eyes, and a weighted menace in the stoop of the powerful shoulders, and his sword point switched back and forth before him, restlessly, like the black tip of a tiger's gaudy tail before the charge.

Through doors whose presence he had not even suspected, the spearmen were pouring into the throne-room. Swiftly, with the precision of long training, they formed a rank against the far wall, and then came forward slowly. As they moved, their spears fell forward in menace so that their cubit-length, slashing points formed a solid line from wall to wall. And a second rank formed behind them, and their spears reached forward between the shoulders of their comrades, and another and another rank, until a forest of those keen and deadly blades, any one of which might slash a man to ribbons, moved slowly, irresistibly to pin Wan Tengri against the wall. And still other ranks marched in and executed their drilled pivot against the wall, and dropped their spears into line to thrust their points past their comrades ahead and march onto the slaughter.

Wan Tengri growled in his throat, and a little laughed, for it seemed Aosoka had despaired of destroying him with magic and had turned to the one sorcery that one fighting man could not overcome, and that was the overwhelming weight of other fighting men's steel. In slow motion, Wan Tengri dried his sword against his silk-draped thigh and swore as notches caught in the robe. That was what the magic net had done to his keen blade! Well, it would make more jagged wounds! Now by Christos, this floor would run red before those bearded, small devils tore him down.

His gray eyes ranged fiercely over the spearmen, thrusting his death toward him on a hundred, a thousand glittering points. Little more than a hand of paces away now, the first of the blades, and still more men came in to pivot against the wall and lay their spears in rest—and march as inexorably as eventual death, as time itself, or the slow, crawling wash of the tides of the sea.

Wan Tengri's voice came out in rumbling softness through the fierce thrust of his red beard. "Ha, thou little men, thou twisted dwarfs, does it take so many of thee to make up the stature of a single fighting barbarian from the west? Where is thy magic? I wipe my feet upon it? I have carved it with my sword—as presently, I shall carve my

sign upon thy living flesh! Do you dare, then, to brave my magic?"

And Wan Tengri threw back his fiery head and laughed, so that the front ranks of the impregnable spears wavered a little, before the pressure from behind drove them on again. But, for all the madness of his shouting mirth, thus defying death, there was reason for his laughter. If he could once get past those first bristling spears, his keen fighter's brain had told him, these overcrowded spearmen with their long, unwieldy weapons, would be as helpless as fish in a net—and so he laughed. For here at his feet was a net!

WHILE the men still came forward, Wan Tengri stooped, and his sword was between his teeth as he seized the magic golden gauze with both powerful hands and set the might of his shoulders into a wrenching heave. The metal bit into his burned left hand with such pain that his lips shrank back from clenched teeth, and it put more power into the straining wrench of his loins and solid thighs.

The first spearmen had stepped upon the edge of the net, and those were pitched backward upon their fellows as Wan Tengri's might wrenched the golden gauze out from beneath them—and with the same swirling twist of his titan's body, he whirled the net through the air!

"Thy own magic against thee!" he roared and flung the tough metallic fabric over the heads and spearpoints of the nearest men!

He heard shouts of terror, and saw the shrinking in the bearded faces of the Tinsunchi. Then the net settled, and it covered a full dozen cubits of the broken foremost ranks. The spearpoints slashed at it and a few cut their way through, but the rest were dragged down to the floor as Wan Tengri walked forward over the net. His weight depressed the lances, pressed men to their knees under the drag of the golden gauze they feared. His slashing blade lopped off the few spear-heads that thrust through. Wan Tengri walked on, and there were no spears to oppose him. The flanks could not reach him, for the close press of other comrades about them, and before Wan Tengri their spears were all borne to the earth. Men went from their knees to fall flat upon their faces and moan with their terror. The few who threatened, Wan Tengri's terrible sword cut down! And Wan Tengri walked across their prostrate bodies toward the doors he had burst open!

There were a hundred clamoring alarms in the palace, the clanging of brazen gongs and the dull thump of swift-beaten drums, the blare of trumpets. Wan Tengri could hear the heavy tread of armored men, running in ranks—and the sword swung like lead in his fist. He had conquered magic and armored men, and yet he was beaten. His only hope had lain in the contempt of Aosoka and the swiftness with which he could strike, and his swiftness had spent itself against magic and men who did not matter. Still Aosoka hid behind stone walls—and was no longer contemptuous. Instead, he was summoning all his cohorts to put down one barbarian from the west.

Wan Tengri grinned wryly, stepping from the last prostrate form of a guard into the corridor by which he had entered. Behind him, moans of terror and the anger of those whom the net had spared and who could not reach him, lifted in a bedlam that shook the roof. It was a form of tribute that Prester John could not scorn—but he was beaten. For the moment only! Safety lay in flight, and there was still the disaffected legion of Visimar! Wan Tengri nodded his great shaggy head, and there was a sullen rage upon his heavy brows. He would retreat, for the present, and their gods need help the men who stood in his way! Fury was fierce in him at this defeat, and his eyes shot

hotly about him. The sword was restless as a serpent in his fist. Some loot he carried to persuade the red legion, the magic ears at his belt. Wan Tengri glanced toward them contemptuously, yet frowned to remember what the priest had heard. It was not enough!

WAN TENGRI stepped out into the perfumed coolness of the court and his eyes quested up the golden ladder toward the dazzling brilliance of the glass above. A hard stubbornness set upon him; that, too, he would take to Visimar! He set his feet upon the pyramid and mounted to the golden ladder; he put his sword between his teeth and began to climb. The seared flesh of his left hand sent hot waves up to his brain, but he used it with the fierce deliberation of a wild animal ripping at a wound. At each stab of pain, his fury mounted with him. He heard the nearing shouts and heavy tread of men and knew that they would trap him here, follow him by the red stains of the blood he had spilled. His lips shrank from his teeth locked on the sword, and hot fires burned in his gray eyes. By Christos, he would have this glass, or he would die here upon this pyramid of Aosoka! They would find Prester John was not a pleasant man to trap!

He stood upon the narrow crest of the column, and he frowned at the thing he found. On a tripod was a crystal globe around whose interior ants crawled industriously, and the opening was closed with narrow mesh of silk. Above it was a half globe of crystal, and this was looped with brass and set upon a pivot so that it could point in any direction, and from it a narrow rod of brass ran across the width of the circular court of the pyramid to where another such half-globe was posited upon its farther end. The length of the whole was above a hundred cubits, and Wan Tengri swore for it was not a thing a man could run off with. He drew his sword from between his teeth and bent forward to peer through this glass that could see for such vast distances, and his eyes ran along the rod of brass and picked up the other half-globe at its farther end and an oath of amazement leapt to his lips.

Mirrored there was half the city of Byoko, reduced to a ridiculously small size so that the armed guards streaming through the streets seemed but ants acrawl among grains of sand; and beyond he could see the white lift of the walls and the waving high fronds of the high-growing plants. Perhaps, if a man peered through that other glass, these things would seem not small but very large! Surely, this was a great magic —but he could not carry it in his pouch. Wan Tengri straightened, sword in his fist. A smash of his hilt would shatter this thing and its far-seeing magic to fragments. But in that case, when he had conquered Byoko, it would be of no service to him whatever! Wan Tengri grinned slowly, and the battle madness evaporated from his brain. Foolish to die here on this pyramid when a man could run and return to conquer. The camp of Visimar was waiting for him there beyond the walls—

For him, surely, the glass distilled wisdom! Wan Tengri turned his eyes down upon the court of the pyramid, and it was filled with fighting men who shook their long-bladed spears up at him, who twanged their bows restlessly and awaited only orders to send their swift arrows through his brawny body, outlined like a figure in bronze against the burning blue of the sky.

Very deliberately, Wan Tengri drew the golden ears from his belt, frowned as he used his dagger point to flick out the shorn cartilage of the priest's actual fleshly ears. Then, gravely, he fastened the ears over his own.

"Phagh!" he rumbled in his chest, " 'Tis the first time ever I willingly wore the asses' ears, but it is a thing I have

learned—that men fear their own magic more than any other's."

He tautened then to the vibrations that thrummed through his skull, caught by the trembling fabric of the great ears. But it was simply a vast beating of sound, and made no sense. Enough to drive a man mad, as perhaps it did. He remembered the shrill, senseless laughing of the priest who had knelt at the foot of the pyramid. Abruptly, he caught a shrill whisper.

"Amlairic, I am here to help thee!"

WAN TENGRI started and his eyes quested off toward the roof of the palace where the other half-globe rested. A slender stripling of a youth stood there and, as if he felt Wan Tengri's gaze, he removed a helmet from his head and his tresses flowed golden in the sun. That would be Thanamund, whom Tossa called her brother. Well, small good he could do from there! If he had a stout bow now, and a dozen men—but he was alone, and no arms hung about his youth's body.

A shout below him pulled Wan Tengri's eyes down to the packed court and a smile of derision moved his solid lips. *Phagh!* The fools never learned anything. If he could clear those spear-points by a leap, they would be too crowded for good fighting. Still, a man might slip a dagger into flesh even in such close ranks—and there was Aosoka, in a golden litter, gazing up at him with sleepy, *kohl*-smeared eyes.

"Come down, Wan Tengri," he called in his soft voice. "Come down and you shall have your chance for life against the condemned men of Visimar's legion. If you remain there, the grass-devils shall strangle you."

Wan Tengri's heavy brows knotted in a scowl. He felt huge, invulnerable here upon his high peak, and he knew why neither spear nor arrow was loosed upon him. Aosoka feared lest a stray bolt should shatter his magic glass. Wan Tengri tapped it lightly with his dagger hilt and the note of it hummed out musically, sent a soothing vibration through his skull.

"I fear not your grass-devils," he said shortly. "At their first appearance, I shall shatter your magic-seeing glass, as I have taken the hearing ears for my own use. Afterward, I shall come for the bauble of wisdom upon your forehead, Aosoka!"

The fat-hung face contorted in anger and, at the lift of his hand, the litter was moved back under the cover of the colonnade that surrounded the court, and the men of the red legion drew back through the crowded ranks so that only the bearded Tinsunchi were close about the pyramid. It was a thing Wan Tengri did not understand and he eyed them closely, seeing how their beards glistened with oil and their long hair had been drawn forward over their faces so that their eyes peered out beadily, like animals from a cavern's mouth.

His own beard was wet with the sweat of his killing and, in mockery, he waggled it at the infuriated dwarfs below, and drew his fiery locks forward over his eyes. And he laughed.

"Think you to frighten Prester John with your ugly masks?" he roared. He squatted and made a gargoyle face. "Boo, you naughty grass-devils! Boo!"

Thanamund's whisper pierced to his ears. "They loose the devils upon thee, Wan Tengri. Canst you walk this slender rod of brass if I loose darkness upon the court?"

Wan Tengri pulled his eyes away from the mob below him, where men were detaching the heads of their spears and lifting them like thin-shanked trumpets to their lips. He eyed the brass that stretched across the court, and his eyes narrowed in memory of feats he had seen at the bazaar in Alexandria where men balanced on a thin rope drawn taut between poles and did their monkey tricks. But usually, they used

a long pole for balancing. If he had now, one of those tipless spears—

"Wait," he sent his deep voice across the court. "When I shout to Christos on high, he will release darkness upon you, and drink up your grass-devils! Ho, you cowardly spearmen, do you fear to loose your weapons, lest I turn them back upon thee?"

The cheeks of the Tinsunchi swelled against their lance-shafts, and puffs of fog soared toward him—and Wan Tengri remembered flashingly what Bourtai had gasped there in the high-grass: "A handful of fog—and I could not breathe."

Wan Tengri straightened with a lithe movement and his sword glimmered in his fist. He held his breath and the clouds of fog struck dryly on his sweat-glistening chest, struck his fiery hair and his beard, and he saw dancing motes in the sunbeams—and he blew out his breath with a great laughter that sent the fog swirling away. So they thought to drag down Wan Tengri from his pinnacle with a handful of stinking dust! He coughed a little, and his nostrils sting—and he laughed again, and drew his hair and his beard more closely over his nostrils with a stroke of his wide hand.

"Have you not learned, oh fools!" he chanted, "that your grass-devils have no power over Prester John, whom the hurricane spawned? I blow away your death-fog like spider webs on the wind! Ha, does this bit of glass stay you from using your spears? That is soon mended!"

With a blow of his sword hilt, Wan Tengri shattered the curved half-sphere of glass and a shrill cry lifted from Aosoka's lips.

"Spears!" Aosoka shouted. "His flesh cannot turn your spears! Tear him down! Strip the flesh from his bones! Pluck out his blaspheming tongue!"

On and on ran the thin voice of Aosoka, but Wan Tengri, with his mocking eyes fixed on the spearmen below him, laughed aloud, and afterward lifted his sword toward the zenith.

"Now, oh Christos!" he cried. "Let thy darkness fall upon these unbelievers, who taunt thy priest! Blot out the light of thy sun from their eyes!"

Thanamund, on the far roof, waved a hand to show that he understood and, afterward, began to empty great bags over the edge of the roof, so that clouds of dark swirling dust eddied down upon the heads of the Tinsunchi, and their fearful shouts rushed upward. But those close about the pyramid set their tough small bodies and hurled their spears upward. Some Wan Tengri wove aside to avoid, and others he batted aside with his ready sword so that they pitched down upon the men who had thrown them—and the darkness spread, and Wan Tengri reached out a great hand and caught a spear from the air. His eyes searched hungrily for the litter of Aosoka, but the darkness was filling all the court, and the stinging powder swirled up to burn in his own eyes. Wan Tengri swore under his breath. For a moment, he had hoped that now, with a single spear-cast, he could end this battle for the throne, but the chance was gone in the thickness of the darkness that Thanamund had loosed.

Wan Tengri grinned savagely. His chance would come again, and soon. First, he must reach the camp of Visimar, and— He set foot upon the slim brass rod that stretched out over the blackness of the court, and held the pole across his chest as he had seen jugglers do many times before.

"Spirits of the high-air," he called, and made his voice deep and chanting. "Lift me now into thy bosom! Snatch me from this post of peril that I may return again to drive this weakling from

the throne he has usurped! Bear me up, now, O hurricane that sired me!"

He stepped out boldly upon the rod, sliding one foot before him, drawing the other up, and balancing with the length of the pole held across his chest. He was enjoying himself hugely. Let them fathom this magic if they could!

He made his voice lighter, and more distant, but still it made the golden ears upon his head vibrate unpleasantly. "Thank you, spirits of the high-air. Carry me far, and set me down in safety that I may return to conquer this city for thy worship. Safely, O hurricane! Sa-a-afely!"

And he let his voice trail off as if it faded with distance, and he was half-way across the span of the court. The rod sagged some little way with his great weight and twice he almost lost his balance to tumble amid the milling, terrified Tinsunchi—and once he was tempted to cast the spear downward and leap after it to slay in this darkness where he could strike only foes. But he kept on with the slow pushing of foot before foot, feeling the bite of the brass into his calloused soles. Presently, with a great leap, he cleared the last gap to the roof and found himself confronting Thanamund. There was shrewdness and wisdom in the man's blue eyes, but there was a slyness about his mouth that Wan Tengri did not like, so that his grin of gratefulness was half of warning.

"There will be reward for this presently," he growled. "Take me now from this stinking palace, and guide me to the city of tents. Then do thou go to Tossa and Bourtai and bid them hide until I come again. Then they will make their way, by the secret paths they no doubt know, to the throne-room of Aosoka and wait for me there."

Thanamund bowed low to do Wan Tengri homage, but it seemed to the red giant that there was mockery in his voice.

"And when will you come again, great Amlairic?"

Wan Tengri laughed deeply, and heard shouts of terror from the court, for it must seem to them that death hovered over them from the high-air.

"On the day that the Heaven-Bear turns against his chosen people," Wan Tengri said shortly, "and at the Hour of the Bear, look for me in the throne-room of Aosoka!"

Thanamund's quick eyes lifted and were a little daunted with the question in their depths, but Wan Tengri met his gaze squarely and there was no humor in the twist of his solid lips. "I gave you an order, Thanamund," he said softly. "Be careful lest thy sloth eat up my gratefulness."

Thanamund bowed low, and a glaze that might be fear, or might be menace filmed his sharp blue eyes. "This way, lord," he whispered. "This way from the palace of Aosoka, and to the city of the tents. And, master, we will be ready when the Heaven-Bear turns against his own!"

"See you to it," Wan Tengri growled. "It will be no longer than my magic shall need to summon the Bear-hosts against these fools. Lead on—and swiftly."

And Wan Tengri followed with lithe stride where the golden-haired youth led him, and as he walked, he hummed thinly in his nose, though the vibration in the golden ears hurt his skull a little. For, out of this bit of magic and that, and out of the magic of his own shrewd brain, Prester John was shaping a plan.

"On the day when the Heaven-Bear turns," he sang, "on the people he falsely suckled so long; when the trumpets sound the Hour of the Bear, a great darkness and a great fear will fall upon the city, and a great conqueror shall march to triumph."

Wan Tengri laughed. "And the conqueror's name will be—Prester John!"

The roil of drugged smoke maddened the little men of the Bear-God—they leapt from the walls to the moat or ran howling through the city streets.

VIII.

WAN TENGRI wound a devious way through the streets of Byoko and impatience strode with him, for he knew that soon it would be impossible to get past the walls of the city—unless indeed the Tinsunchi actually believed he had vanished into thin air above the palace of Aosoka. Wan Tengri smiled grimly at the thoughts, and goaded Thanamund to greater speed. Presently, they came to a house built against the city wall and, through a hidden place in a pit beneath it, there was a gateway.

"I leave thee here, master," Thanamund whispered. "The city of tents is but a little way beyond the moat. The gate of the barbarians on which they hang the bodies of the traitors is a hundred cubits to the east."

Wan Tengri nodded and, with a sway of his shoulders, tugged open the stubborn door. The waters of the moat lapped at the sill, and he glowered at the clear, blue depths.

"Remember—the day," he growled. "And see to it that Tossa and Bourtai await me, unharmed, at the palace of Aosoka, which presently shall be mine. I hold thee to account."

"On my head be it," Thanamund repeated humbly.

Wan Tengri waved a blunt hand and Thanamund faded back into the shadows and presently the trapdoor thudded shut on the pit where a door opened on the moat. Wan Tengri nagged at the golden ears upon his head. They were smooth enough, but they made his ears ache and they tugged at the unaccustomed muscles of his scalp. Yet, he would need them in the city of tents. He could not tell how far his deeds had lifted the fear that ruled the red men, and held them subservient to the Tinsunchi. He would need their help, for the whole city was alarmed against him, and it was plain that, for this say, Christos denied the victory.

A little Wan Tengri wondered at the completeness with which he had accepted this new Christos, he who never bothered much with the gods and in turn was let alone. To be sure, he had made the usual sacrifices to Mars and to Mithra before the games, but that was in a matter of propitiating fortune; a precaution no wise man would overlook. And taking it all in all, Christos had not been too kind.

Twice the cup of fortune had been lifted to his lips; once in far Turgohl, and today in Byoko, and it had been dashed away barely tasted. The followers of Christos preached a crazy doctrine: whom god loveth he beateth with a rod of steel, or some such superstition. By Ahriman, he had enough of this rod of steel! He'd like a cloth of silk for a change, and perhaps a rod of gold, a scepter, in his fist.

He looked down at his blunt hands and worked the fingers of the left, scowled at the burns across the palm. Lucky it was his left, or it might hamper his sword in some shrewd twist. He blew out a heavy breath between his lips, ripped off his green silken robe and knotted it about his loins so that it would not impede him. He gripped his sword between his teeth to save it from the rusting water, and lay on his belly to ease his legs into the moat soundlessly.

It was tepid as the baths of Pharaoh, but he felt it relaxing the tauntness of his fighting muscles. Its sweet, clean dampness came gratefully to his nostrils, and he let the waters lave about his throat, float his streaming hair, before he struck out with strong heavy strokes that fairly battered his way through the moat. There was no lithe grace in his swimming, but there was efficiency and a hard defiance in the scornful deliberation of his movements like the blundering charge of a Roman trireme. He kept his head turned straight ahead, and the current tugged at his hair. The golden

ears chafed his flesh and he swore between his teeth.

High rushes grew close to the farther shore and beyond them lifted the high waving fronds of the plants that grew everywhere about Byoko; and Wan Tengri sloshed among the reeds, and paused to stare up at the bud and flower-tipped crests of the high plants; and a puzzled frown knotted his brow. He fingered the long blades of the leaves that grew in hands from the stems, and a slow smile crept across his solid lips. Beyond a doubt, this was the plant that in far Hind they called *gangika*, and the "divine herb" and "the giver of joy unsupportable." And it was strange to find it growing here. Wan Tengri pushed on toward the city of tents.

ONCE HE TURNED to glower toward the walls of Byoko, but the few guards all stared upon the city itself. It was there they looked for danger today, and for a brief moment Wan Tengri's nostrils flared in hope. If he could unite the legions and strike swiftly— He shook his head. They would still be too fearful. It took an army united in purpose and trusting in its officers to seize a walled city. He nodded to himself as he plowed on through the shoaling rushes toward the lift of the shore. He had the means to rid them forever of their slavish fear of the Heaven-Bear! An instant of doubt troubled him then, for the Heaven-Bear had struck him down, almost carelessly. *Phagh,* it was only some other minor magic, and he had this day conquered greater sorceries!

He strode from the rushes and glared toward the skin-draped tents of the red legion, saw the fox-covered *yurt* of Visimar where guards leaned on the pommels of long, naked swords with their uneasy eyes on the Gate of the Barbarians, which was closed. Wan Tengri's body was steaming already in the furnace of the sun. He thrust the curved sword through his girdle, and strode straight toward the tent of Visimar.

A child saw him coming and cried out and ran, and a woman wailed fearfully from the entrance of a tent. When he was still a dozen paces from the tent of Visimar, the guards heard him and whirled their heavy, two-handed swords aloft. Their eyes strained wide beneath the visors of iron-helmets—and they did not attack.

Wan Tengri ignored them, stalking forward, feeling the awkward wag of the big ears pulling on his own, angry over the irritation—and a little amused at his own anger. He strove under the threat of the lifted swords.

"Begone, slaves," he snarled.

The men flinched under the assault of his voice, and their swords wagged uncertainly and sagged to earth, and they backed away from his thudding path. Before the entrance of the tent, Wan Tengri paused and set his fists upon his hips.

"Come out, Visimar!" he called harshly. "Thou are freed of the Tinsunchi curse, and freed of their terror. Come out! It is Amlairic who commands you!"

There was silence, save for the soft wailing of the woman, save for the distant rumor of armed men within the walls, and then the flaps of the tent entrance were brushed aside, and Visimar stood out and gazed into Wan Tengri's eyes. He wore no armor, no helmet upon his crown of red hair, and the belt that confined his fringed woolen tunic, held only the plain brass hilt of a dagger. Through a space of breathing, the two men eyed each other equally, then Visimar spoke heavily.

"Greetings, Amlairic, kinsman," he said.

Wan Tengri grunted, and, carefully freed his tender ears from the golden plates upon them, tossed the tokens of magic to the ground at Visimar's feet.

"I have brought the magic of Aosoka low," he said shortly. "I have smashed his long-seeing glass and have robbed his priests of their ears. I bring freedom to you and your race."

A blaze came into the level gaze of Visimar. "Already the swift news of thy great deeds have reached us, Amlairic. Thou are a man of valor and of might—and of great magic!" He spoke eagerly, and yet there was a heaviness in his voice, and the fire of his gaze died. "If thou hadst come to us earlier, some little thing might have been accomplished for the *skalds* to sing. But you come too late. We are under the weight of Aosoka's magic, and we are condemned, I and every tenth man of the legion."

Wan Tengri moved his heavy shoulders impatiently, turned on the gaping guards. "You will take your stand beside of the path to the Gate of the Barbarians," he ordered crisply. "If any man, woman or child goes that way, slay him. Fail me, and the magic ears of Aosoka will tell me of it—and the magic of Amlairic will slay you all! *March!*"

The men fell in, two by two as their discipline had taught, and marched toward the gate and Wan Tengri felt restlessness stir in his vitals. With men of their ilk—but they had no spirit. Even Visimar, their leader, had no strength in his guts.

"We will talk in your tent," Wan Tengri said shortly.

Visimar bowed his bare head and drew the tent flap, and Wan Tengri ducked into the hot closeness of the interior and caught the stench of food burned before a small godling fastened to the lance that held up the roof. He usurped the white horse-skin of Visimar's chieftainship and flung himself down upon it. And Visimar showed only a flash of anger that died at once.

WAN TENGRI snorted his impatience and contempt. In the name of the Crucified, how was he going to loot Byoko with a spiritless legion? "The magic of Aosoka slumbers," he said shortly. "It may be for an hour, happily for a day. I have done that. In this time, we must act! You shall march with me across the sea of Buryat, taking with you such men as you can trust—at least the hundred who have been condemned with you. In a hand of days, we will return and sack Byoko!"

"With a hundred men, kinsman?" Visimar's voice was dying, as his spirit was dying.

Wan Tengri roared his answer. "With my magic, and some small help from Christos before whom you kneeled!"

Visimar shook his head heavily. "I betrayed my gods, and the wrath of the Tinsunchi fell upon me. So I die, and my men die."

"Like cringing dogs who await your master's whip!" Wan Tengri mocked him. "You are not men, but jackals! I should have rallied the doves of the palace of Aosoka to help me in my battle!"

He rose to his feet and his head thrust against the sagging weight of the rich furs.

"Now, by Ahriman," he growled. "I never thought to appeal in vain to the men of my race. The spirits of your women have sucked out your bellies. You are soulless dogs!"

Visimar's eyes held a hint of fire, and his hand strayed toward his dagger. "Beware how you name me, lest I forget our kinship!"

Wan Tengri spat upon the ground between them. "Claim not kinship with me, thou lump of offal!" His eyes carefully gauged the warrior as Visimar sprang to his feet. Would this anger carry him far enough? *Phagh!* As well try to fight with the sword of wood with which they retired the creaking and aged gladiators who had pleased the mob. To this state had magic reduced

a valiant people. Wan Tengri's lips grinned back from his teeth in sudden fierceness.

The muscles of his thighs surged into sudden power and he caught and threw Visimar across his hip, plunged with him to the earth and so pinned down his dagger arm beneath him. But Wan Tengri drew his own dagger and put its point against the straining throat of Visimar. The bright blood squeezed from the keen wound and, when Visimar thought he was a dead man, Wan Tengri suddenly whipped the blade aside and bent his mouth to the wound. He leaped to his feet, with the blood upon his beard, and he made an elaborate business of swallowing, and his teeth showed white and fierce between his solid lips.

But Visimar leaped up in terror. "Thou sorcerer!" he swore, but his voice was quavering. "I will taste they own blood and thy *mana* no longer will soar above mine!" The dagger was in his fist, but Wan Tengri ignored it and thrust his own dagger into its sheath.

"You shall, my brother, *anda,*" he said softly. "You shall, when the hand of days is past, and when the walls of Byoko have fallen before us! Until that time, Visimar, beware how you cross me—or my *mana* will devour thine! Without soul, thy body will wither and the strength go from thy stout limbs, and you will rot!"

Visimar trembled and the whites showed entirely around his pupils. "Let me taste thy blood now, *anda,*" he whispered, "for thy anger is quick—"

"In a hand of days, Visimar," Wan Tengri said shortly. "Now, you will obey! Fool, what have you to lose? Your life? It is already forfeit! Do you whimper that Christos helped you not? By the blue tusks of Ahriman, learn that the gods help those who wield a sharp sword in their own defense!"

"Is thy magic so strong?" Visimar whispered.

"You have heard of my magic," Wan Tengri said somberly. "How, alone, I invaded the palace of Aosoka, and tore off the ears of the priest, and turned the golden gauze of the white fire against the spearmen who came for me; how I mounted the pyramid and destroyed the long-seeing glass and afterward my magic filled the court with darkness and the spirits of the high-air that sired me carried me to safety so that I could come to save thee and thy people!"

Visimar straightened slowly. "Thou —was sent?"

Wan Tengri rolled his shoulders impatiently. It is enough that I have come. Take thou my orders, or die! We will need to find a place of many bears, *anda.*"

Visimar spoke slowly, as if he thought not of what he said, but of other things. "There is a rocky hill in the midst of the sea of Buryat, where the Tinsunchi tend a great herd. I can lead you to it—if you can defeat the grass-devils."

WAN TENGRI grunted, and opened his lips to tell the secret of the grass-devils, and did not. Visimar was gaining some courage. Feed him but a little more—Wan Tengri picked up the golden ears, and set them wincingly upon his sore ears.

"I will ask of the magic ears," he said, deepening his voice portentously. He clasped a hand to each ear and waved his head, and turned thrice in a circle. "By the Megaraean sphinx," he rumbled, and hid a grin in his beard. "By the spirit of the Heaven-Bear which I shall conquer, I command you, reveal to me the secret of the grass-devils!"

He mocked himself while he straightened then in an attitude of strained listening. Bourtai could have done a better job of incantation, but this would serve. It would serve— He took off the ears.

"These magic ears," said Wan Tengri gravely, "have told me certain things. I know the way to defeat the grass-devils

and their blades of grass that can strangle a warrior—or a tiger. You have in your *ordu* the skins of animals these grass-devils, Visimar, for look you, they told me so! And rendered fat from their bones? With these we will trick the grass-devils, Visimar, for look you, they will smell the fat of the animals they already have slain; and the men will wear masks of the furs of these animals also to deceive their eyes. If that fails, there is another magic which I know, for look you, these animals whom the grass-devils have slain, are free forever of the devils' spells—and that immunity I can give also to your men!"

Visimar's eyes were narrowed, and he swore fiercely. "So always, we had the power to best these devils under our very hands, and— Amlairic, I know thee now! Thou art the deliverer whom prophecies promised my people!"

Wan Tengri grunted. In Turgohl, too, they had said, *"Thou art the man!"* To Ahriman with their prophecies, and their saviors! What he wanted was a rich city under his heel for the looting—and there was, of course, the matter of his pledge to Christos.

"Yes, I am the man," he said dryly to Visimar. "Have the hundred men you choose to follow us take the skins and fat of these devil-slain animals with them. And let them steal singly into the high grass to meet with us at sunset a thousand paces toward the hill of bears, though you need not state it so."

But Visimar dropped to his knees and placed his hand between the hands of Wan Tengri in fealty, saying in the ancient formula:

"Thy way, my way, lord! My possessions thine, and my blood, all thine, and my sword beside thine in battle!"

And when Visimar rose to his feet, there was a strong smile on his own broad, beardless mouth, and there was courage in his eyes. "Now, I know that we shall conquer!" he cried, "and my men shall know! The legion will march behind me, behind thee, our deliverer!"

Wan Tengri hesitated, and shook his head. "Thy legion shall wait here for our coming. A hundred men, Visimar, lest the legion vaunt in its own might and doubt the power that has delivered them!"

Visimar bowed his head, "Thou art all-wise, lord," he said. "The hundred men, equipped as you decree, shall wait for us a thousand paces to the north and west at sunset! What of me, lord?" There was a new humbleness, a reverence in his address—yet there was greater strength in the bearing of his shoulders.

A little Wan Tengri scowled. Men were fools, that they must lean upon another stronger than themselves, or blame the gods for failure. Prester John would stand on his own two-legs— "Not," he muttered, "that I mean disrespect to you, Christos, but it's like I said. A man must swing his own sword, and not wait for such a very busy god as yourself to give it an extra thrust for him. A man must have a certain luck, and it is there the gods help, if they will." He touched the bit of the True Cross. "And I have not forgotten my pledge, Christos, but there have been certain difficulties. If you'll stand by a bit longer, you'll have those fifty thousand, even though they be scrawny small bearded Tinsunchi—and you won't be minding if I help myself to their treasure?"

Visimar waited with bowed head while Wan Tengri thus invoked his magic in a tongue he did not understand and then Wan Tengri grinned at him and threw a beamlike arm about Visimar's shoulders.

"Why, *anda,* brother," he cried, "you march with me! And together, we will do a few small deeds. Spread among thy people the word that, within a hand of days their deliverer will return and, on that day, the Heaven-Bear will turn and rend those who falsely call themselves his chosen people! And they shall

have the looting of Byoko, only that I reserve the half of all the loot for myself—that is for Christos, as the saying goes. Now, get thee gone!"

And Visimar bowed low and lifted his right arm in salute, and ran off among the skin tents of his people, and his quick voice leaped among them so that where he ran there was a murmur, and then a shouting, and a swelling chant to Amlairic, of the mighty magic; to Amlairic, the deliverer. And Wan Tengri swaggered a little as he went back inside the black-fox tent and began to equip himself with the most resplendent of Visimar's armor, and test the bows there for weight. He hummed thinly through his nose, which was a habit of Prestor John's when he was happy and the battle went according to his liking.

It seemed as nothing to him now that he had promised these people to raze the high walls of Byoko and destroy a mighty nation with no more than a hundred men who leaned too strongly on magic, and would turn coward if that magic failed. Prestor John eyed himself in horned iron helmet, and belted tunic, catching the distorted image in the sheen of a brazen shield, and Prester John laughed softly in his throat. A hundred men? Why, by the hot hell of Ahriman, he would do it single-handed! He touched the bauble about his throat.

"With your help, Christos, of course," he mumbled. "Forget not those fifty thousand new worshipers!"

It was a fine thing to have a god like Christos who cared only for more worshipers, and not a tittle for the loot that might come through the conquest. Aye, there was the god for a conqueror—for Prester John!

Presently when Wan Tengri strode, resplendent, from the tent of the chieftain he saw that the guards on the walls of Byoko were peering toward the city of tents, but what could they tell of one red-headed man among so many? It was true that Wan Tengri's thews were greater and that he towered half a head even above these strong warriors but at this distance such things could not be seen. So Wan Tengri seated himself before the tent of the black foxes and the people came and paid their homage on their knees and hailed him as their deliverer until even Prester John's insatiable pride was weary of it and he was glad when Visimar returned secretly to report that the hundred were on their way.

Then Visimar armed himself and by their separate ways they stole into the high grass to meet a little way beyond the limits of the camp. When Tengri drew his sword and slashed down a single high plant of the *gangika* which everywhere waved high crests about the walls of Byoko, and he cut off the hairy buds with their thick dust of resin upon them and thrust the stem into the peak of his helmet.

"A farther magic which I will brew tonight," he grinned at Visimar. "Mayhap it is already known to you?"

Visimar shook his head in wonderment, "Nay, never have we dared to touch the plants of *kentyr*, which the Tinsunchi call by the name of *hasa*. From it, they weave powerful ropes and for this reason, perhaps, it is forbidden to any save the grandsons of heaven."

"For that reason or another," Wan Tengri agreed with a grin, and they swung off side by side through the high grass toward the rendezvous with the hundred a thousand paces to the north and west, toward the hill of bears that was hidden in the seat of Buryat. The golden ears swung by a thong of gut about Wan Tangri's neck, and his keen sword rubbed softly against his thigh; and upon his back was a stout bow, not so powerful as his own, but strong enough. His burned left hand he had soaked in grease and he wore across the

palm a pad of leather. The iron helmet with its curving horns of the wild *aurochs* fitted well with his fierce beard and the fiery sweep of his mane, and Wan Tengri was content.

At sunset then, Wan Tengri rose in the midst of the rendezvous and sent a low call echoing through the high, close reeds of the devil-grass, and from every side voices answered him. Men of the red legion ran swiftly then and each knelt in fealty at his feet and threw his sword to earth in token of service. And Wan Tengri touched each hilt gravely with his hands, and with the bit

Visinar gasped, slumped down clawing at his throat. Tossa laughed down at him, and nodded to monkeylike Bourtai. "We'll have no three-part rule now," she said coldly.

of the True Cross about his throat. Afterward, he had them bring the fat of the devil-slain animals and he worked magic over it, knotting his brows beneath the clamp of the iron helmet to think up phrases that would come as second nature to Bourtai. For a little he missed the twisted, small wizard; missed the keen stab of his tongue and the prodding of his shrewd brain. He might be needing Bourtai—

When the incantation was done, Wan Tengri had all the men make masks, which would cover them to their eyes, from the skins of the devil-slain animals, and the hair of the skins was larded thick with the fat, and turned inward against the mouths and nostrils of the men.

"Now, then," he told them roughly, "if the grass-devils loose their strangling fogs against you, you will be safe. Hunt them down and kill them, for they will take the form of Tinsunchi to frighten you. That is because they will fear your swords on which I have laid the magic of Amlairic and of Christos. Form up! We march till the Hour of the Bear, and afterwards you shall have your three hours of sleep. And awake to conquest!"

A shout, muffled because of the masks the warriors wore, lifted up softly, and Wan Tengri swung his sword in salute and turned to lead the way through the tall grass—and secretly rubbed fat into his own beard and drew long fiery locks of hair across his nostrils. Visimar shouted his orders and the hundred warriors swung off through the gathering dusk. Mosquitoes rose in black clouds, but the stinking grease protected the men; and the ground waved up and down like a carpet in the wind, and in the low places the earth sucked at their feet so that men muttered incantations against the devils. Three times during the night, a tiger sent out a coughing roar and wild things scuttled from the path of the legion, hares and a grunting small thing like a pig, and once a raccoon-dog yelped and fled, but not so swiftly as a following arrow. And a warrior slung its dusky yellow carcass across his back by its bushy tail, and grinned. It was fat and would make good eating.

By the wheeling great stars above, Wan Tengri judged the Hour of the Bear and halted the legion upon a low rise from the high sweep of the grass.

"No fires," he growled to Visimar. "Let them sleep on empty bellies. There will be food in plenty tomorrow."

But Wan Tengri turned the brass shield of Visimar face down on the earth and in the bowl built a small fire from sprigs of grass. "I make magic, Visimar," he grunted. "Place upon thy head the ears of the priest, and do thou bend low over this blaze and suck in its magic fumes."

He muttered a litany of names, and no man who crouched near to listen knew that they were only the names of gladiators who had fought beside and against Prestor John in the Circus at Alexandria. When he had finished, he waved a hand through the heat of the fire, and they did not see either that small clumps of the resinous seeds of *gangika* fell into the flame. They saw only that thick fumes coiled upward, and that there was a crackling of small explosions in the heart of the fire. And Visimar pulled back his red hair and, setting his lips lest his men see his fear, he bent his head above the flame and sucked in the hot, acrid fumes. The golden ears fitted close to his skull so that they formed a trap for the smoke and Wan Tengri, watching, narrowed his eyes in abrupt certainty.

VISIMAR coughed and strangled yet kept his head low and, hiding a grin in his beard, Wan Tengri made another pass over the flames and sent more fumes eddying upward. When finally he allowed Visimar to sit erectly again, the chieftain's face was fiery red from

the heat and his eyes streamed with tears he could not control. For moments, Visimar rocked upon his crouching knees, and first he swayed to left and right, and presently swayed backward and forward, and he began to laugh in a senseless, empty way. He laughed and his sides heaved with the reasonless mirth and the warriors shrank back from the fire and made beneath their shields the protective sign of their thunder-god, fist knotted and fingers crossed. Visimar's breath panted with his laughter, and after a while he was still save that he sobbed for breath.

"Now, *anda,*" Wan Tengri said softly, "you have the gift of the far-hearing which the Tinsunchi enjoy. Listen, and tell me what is happening in Byoko! Tell me if you hear the scream of a grass-spirit in warning or despair; tell me if you hear armed men marching upon our trail!"

Visimar's eyes were rolled back in his skull and he swayed, and lifted his hands to his head and his voice came out dully: "I hear a bear roaring in mock-battle; I hear the tread of a tiger a hundred paces to the north, but it flees from the stench of men. I hear a hare squeal in the jaws of a raccoon-dog."

"Listen," Wan Tengri leaned forward, while his eyes glowed with excitement. "Listen to Byoko!"

Visimar's voice was fainter. "I hear the twittering of bats in the high air, and the whisper of no-wind amid the rushes. I hear the plunge of an otter into deep water. I hear—I hear the voice of Byoko!"

There was a sigh like dawn-wind among the crouching men and they swayed as Vismar swayed, and Wan Tengri passed his hand above the fire so that fumes eddied upward into Visimar's dulled face.

"And what says the voice of Byoko?" he asked softly.

Visimar's brows crawled upward, and his lips twitched, but for long he made no answer. "I hear no tread of armed men, but many priests chant in the temple of the Heaven-Bear, and I hear the thudding of drums."

"The drums!" Wan Tengri whispered. "What do the drums say?"

Visimar's head shook from side to side so that his red hair dragged across his shoulders, and whispered on the wool of his tunic. He put his two hands upon his knees and they rose and fell in a curious broken rhythm, and Wan Tengri knew he was hearing the voice of the drums. He frowned heavily, for this was a language he could not read. The Mongols spoke from camp to camp upon drums that thudded softly into the night; and the men of the Empire of Khitai sent their messages through the earth itself with a sound like a silk-wrapped club beating upon a pillar of gold, but their language was a secret thing that only the lords of the land might read. Wan Tengri stirred restlessly and Visimar's hands ceased to beat in their curious rhythm. He laughed loudly and senselessly for a while and then he lay back in deep sleep.

Wan Tengri removed the golden ears and strung them about his neck once more and motioned to the close-grouped men. "Sleep, as your chieftain sleeps," he ordered. "The drums only warn the grass-devils to keep their watch, and what need have we to fear grass-devils—we, whose magic is so strong!"

While the men slept, Wan Tengri sat beside the dying spot of fire in the shield and his eyes brooded upon the blackness of the night, and the small sounds and smells of the high grass crept in upon him; the stealthiness of the beasts of prey, and the frantic squeal of the grass-eaters under their fangs; the rustle of faint winds and the caught moan of a sleeping man, troubled by a dream. He knew the stench of decaying things in the wet places where the land was low and, now and again, va-

grantly, there came to his nostrils the rich sweetness of the high burning heads of peonies, drowsing above the grass.

These things he knew and sensed with the warrior part of him that was always alive to danger, but his mind strayed back to Byoko. Tossa was sleeping there, or perhaps lying awake upon her couch to think of the words Thanamund had borne to her. Bourtai would be weaving of his small spells, or sleeping like a monkey in a tight knot, with his scrawny arms over his head, or whimpering for fear in his dreams. He hoped that Aosoka did not sleep at all. If his gods and his stars were wise, they would have told Aosoka that his days were numbered and that his doom was upon him. Wan Tengri stroked his beard and frowned at the grease that came off on his hands. And Wan Tengri nodded at the darkness, and stirred a soldier to stand watch—and flung himself down to his brief sleep. For his plans were complete.

Before dawn stirred to ruffle its silvery feathers in the east, Wan Tengri roused the camp and, foodless once more save for sun-dried meat they chewed as they marched, the legion struck off into the northwest. Visimar bounced like a boy in his stride, his voice taut with eagerness.

"Thy magic is a wondrous thing, Amlairic!" he cried. "Such dreams as I had this night, and such strength as I feel this morn! No fatigue can touch me, and no cold nor hunger."

"But you would sell your soul for a drink, eh, *anda?*" Wan Tengri asked dryly. "Thy own bottle is long since drained."

"There is that," Visimar conceded. "Colors spoke to me with the tones of bells and drums, and sounds were like peonies in the grass, or like the sky at morning, and the touch of my own flesh beneath my hands was a silken delight—"

His voice ran on, but Wan Tengri's eyes probed into black darkness ahead to where a hill thrust like the hunched shoulders of a bear, against the fainter blackness of the sky.

"I think," he muttered, "that we have come to the hill of the bear. See thou, Visimar, that every magic mask is in place, freshly larded with the enchanted fat; and the men are to kill with their blessed swords every grass-devil who looses a patch of fog!"

Visimar's hand struck his sword-hilt in salute of acknowledgment and Wan Tengri stood alone on the crest of a wave of the sea of Buryat and his eyes brooded toward the hill of bears. A little wind stirred in the darkness and brought him the animal stench, and another acrid smell that was *gangika* burning. Perhaps the Tinsunchi on guard listened to the beating of Byoko drums; or perhaps they sought the drunken laughter and the sweet dreams of *gangika*. Thoughtfully, Wan Tengri slipped his bow over his shoulder and rested it on his right toe; and the muscles rippled across his shoulders as he bent the powerful frame to notch the gut, and an arrow was ready between the fingers of his left hand. Visimar's tread came softly to his side.

"Send half the men to east, and half to west," Wan Tengri ordered. "They will form a great circle, yet let no man lose sight of his brother. When my sword strikes upon my shield, they will charge and kill all who cross their paths—but they will not leave the grass until I summon them by voice. Let them be in their places when first the red eye of the sun looks above the far edge of Buryat."

Wan Tengri nodded to the salute, grinned crookedly over his shoulder at Visimar, and then Wan Tengri stole forward among the waving reeds, nor did his feet make any sound. Unquestioningly, Visimar repeated the orders and the men filed off into the dark mys-

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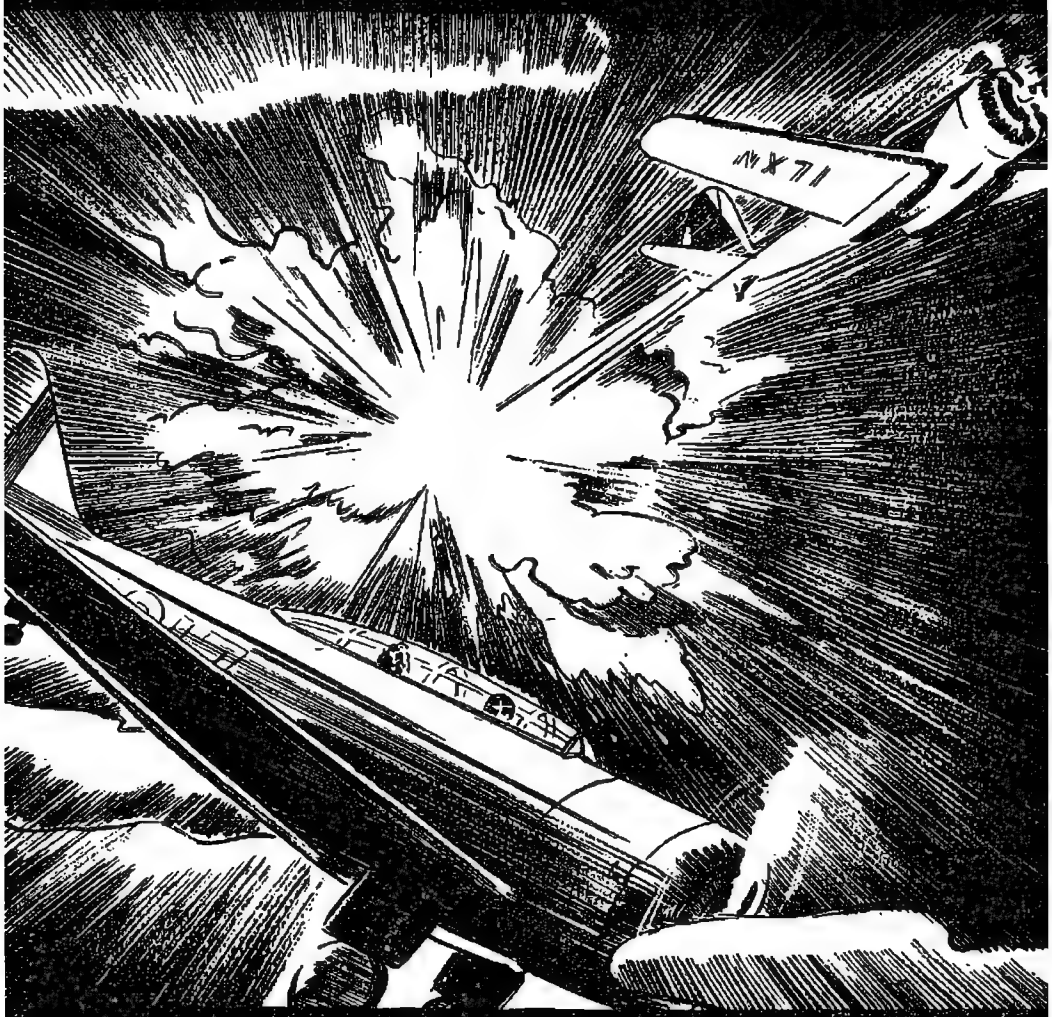
DAY OFF



By H. L. GOLD

DAY OFF

It was a swell excuse—purely fabricated, of course, but—it wasn't!

by H. L. GOLD

Illustrated by Isip

DUST motes, floating dreamily in the golden yellow sunlight outside the large window, beckoned seductively to Morgan. A whirring fan blew at him, and, if he wanted to, he could sit at his desk all day without having to do a thing. If the boss passed, he could move a lot of filled orders around and stare at them with sudden concentration.

He knew he should be grateful for having such a soft job, especially on a hot day like this. He admitted it was better than muscle work. But—

Boy, he thought wistfully, what a game it will be! Both teams tied for first place. Why, hell, they'll be out there with murder in their hearts! Every single'll be like a mortal stab—

Furtively, Morgan pulled out the top drawer of his desk and gazed at the sporting page headline, at the grim-faced pictures, and read the lead paragraph. Seeing so many games, he thought, those sports writers don't get excited over nothing at all. But this time, boy, you could see the guy banging away at his typewriter practically with trembling hands!

Morgan slid the drawer back and sighed. Then, more determinedly, he folded his arms on the desk. The freckles on his brow slipped into creases of desperate thought. How in hell could he manage to see that game?

The situation demanded considerable shrewdness. It wasn't like the beginning of the season. At that time the boss had been very sympathetic whenever Morgan had a funeral to attend, or someone in his family got extremely sick, or he had to stagger out of the office to see a doctor. But now Burbank, the branch manager, was getting pretty wise.

"You know, Morgan," he'd said last time, "for a big ox like you, you seem damn fragile. I never saw a guy have so many illnesses, or sick relatives, or funerals in his family."

"Well, you know how it is, sir," Morgan had explained.

Burbank had looked closely at him. "I'm beginning to think I do, Morgan. This toothache you have today—it has nothing to do with baseball—"

"Oh, no, sir!" Morgan protested virtuously.

"O. K., then. Go to a dentist. But I want to see a filling tomorrow!"

That was the day Lefty Marinelli shut out the visitors; and, luckily, Dr. Sumner found a tiny cavity that could use a filling.

This was a more serious problem. Both teams tied for first place, with the series just around the corner— He'd have to find something real smart to get around Burbank, and at the same time not gum up his chances of seeing the series. No deaths or sicknesses; that was played out. Or was it?

Anxiously, Morgan drummed on the desk. How about heat prostration? Two days ago, Lucy, the typist, keeled over with it. Only Burbank got all jittery and called the ambulance and they carried her off to the hospital. Poor gal, she was supposed to meet her boy friend at the beach. The doctors

wouldn't let her out no matter how much fuss she raised.

Nope, not heat prostration, nor toothache, stomach-ache, headache—Morgan pounded his desk fiercely. What could he think up? He *had* to see that game! He simply *had* to!

Slowly, his shoulders straightened and his freckled brow cleared; but a look of startled disgust remained. What in hell was the matter with him? Why should he weaken his brain thinking up lame excuses? He had a good one.

Morgan stood up decisively and shoved his chair under the desk, as Burbank annoyingly insisted. He put on a checkered sport jacket, one that made Burbank's prim teeth go on edge whenever he saw it, because Morgan had picked it for the clash its pastel yellow-and-green squares made with his blue serge pants which had been salvaged from a discarded business suit.

With the proper air of intent nonchalance, Morgan strode toward the door. When his hand was on the knob, however, a loud "Hey!" stopped him. He turned. Burbank came up, his eyes hard and suspicious.

"Where are you going?" Burbank asked, unwilling to be convinced.

"Customer telephoned. I'm bringing out the folios—"

"Oh, really? You couldn't mail them, I suppose."

Morgan was equal to the situation. "Oh, no, sir. If she likes them"—"she" was a good touch; Burbank was nuts about getting the female trade—"she'll buy today, Mr. Burbank. She's, well, she's in a hurry, sort of."

"Hm-m-m." Burbank stood uncertainly for a moment. Morgan studied the well-scrubbed, prissy face; it was slightly mollified; but the cold suspicion hadn't left it. Then it stirred. Clearly, Burbank had made up his mind. "Very well—"

Suddenly elated, Morgan turned the doorknob and moved to leave.

"I'll run you up there," Burbank said.

Morgan's elation poured away, leaving him something like an empty sack; but he managed to mumble: "Thank you, sir." What difference did it make, he thought, as they took the elevator down and got into Burbank's car; why shouldn't he be polite when everything was ruined anyhow?

"Don't think I distrust you, Morgan. It's just that I understand temptation. And there *is* a big game today, isn't there?"

"I . . . I don't know, sir. Is there?"

"So I've heard. Well, where does your customer live, Morgan?"

Morgan swallowed. Where should it be? Not that it mattered; one place was as good as another. But a crafty idea sneaked in. "Up near the Yankee Stadium, Mr. Burbank." Well, why not? People did live around there, and if he succeeded in getting away, he'd be right near the place. Smart, eh? Morgan thought so. He was quite pleased with himself. Even when Burbank eyed him skeptically, he kept an innocent expression on his honest face.

Now all he had to do was figure out a way of unloading Burbank.

"WHICH street is it, Morgan?" Burbank asked.

Morgan stared around, a trifle wildly. This was getting too close to danger. He'd been confident of his ability to get rid of Burbank, but damn the guy, he stuck like a leech!

"There," Morgan said, pointing at the first right hand one-way street they could enter. He calculated it as a five-minute walk from the stadium.

"Ah!" Burbank said with gratification. "This is exactly the sort of trade the company's been after: solid, respectable middle-class people, who have money to buy, but're afraid of airplanes. Morgan, if we can get in here, we have a toe hold on the biggest market in the world!"

"Oh, yes, sir," Morgan replied. "We certainly will."

One mistake, he confessed glumly. He should've picked a tenement; then Burbank wouldn't have been so tickled. But what the hell! He brightened. He didn't have a prospect there, and he didn't have one here. It was all the same. The main thing, was kidding Burbank for a while and unloading him as soon as possible. That would be a cinch. He was cagy, but dumb.

"Which house is it?" Burbank asked eagerly.

Morgan pointed at one near the corner. His action was pure reflex: the house stood out with great emphasis, brilliantly white and much larger than the other one-family buildings, which were painted a modest brown.

Burbank nodded as if he had expected it all along, and drew the car to the curb. He clambered out hurriedly and slammed the door. Morgan knew it would be a mistake to hesitate. He got out also.

Then what would happen? Well, it would be the wrong house, of course, though he'd be certain of the name and address. So he'd tell Burbank to leave him there; he'd make a few calls on some customers they'd sold, just in case they knew a friend who wanted to buy. There. That was all. Easy!

The street was Atlantic Place. He looked at the house number—2623. O. K., 2623 Atlantic Place. The name? He'd need a real dazzler, one that couldn't possibly be mixed up with any other name, but that'd come later.

He walked rather confidently beside Burbank, along a red-and-blue flagstone path leading from the sidewalk. On both sides were square-cut hedges as high as his shoulder, entirely surrounding a tiny lawn and rock garden. The house, though—that was really impressive: Southern colonial, glaringly white, with the usual high, useless columns on the broad porch.

Burbank stood by, waiting for him to ring. He did so, jabbing his thumb at the bell and holding it there. Two curtains moved, one beside the door, the other three windows away. An instant later the door slammed open and a tall, bald, savage old man faced him, glowering through pince-nez that were fastened to his smoking jacket with a broad black ribbon.

"Well?" the fierce old man challenged.

Morgan didn't pause. He asked, pleasantly: "Mr. Lazarus Myopia?" He thought that was an excellent name. The old man would shout resentment and slam the door in their faces, and then he'd get rid of—

"*Major* Myopia, you sniveling whippersnapper! What do you want?"

Morgan gulped. He felt Burbank's incredulous eyes turning from the old warrior to him. "I mean Lazarus *Z.* Myopia," he cried frantically.

"Yes," the old man said belligerently. "Come, come! What is it? Don't stand there like a . . . a— State your business and go away."

Burbank assumed his most ingratiating smile. Morgan knew what was coming next: the first principle of selling is to get inside, where it's harder to remove you. Nevertheless, he felt weak and unwilling to enter, even if Burbank did succeed in winning over the preposterous old buzzard. Things were slipping out of his grasp; he was no longer captain of his soul and master of his fate.

"Do you mind if we discuss the matter inside, sir?" Burbank asked.

Major Myopia hesitated. Nonsense, Morgan thought viciously. *Major Myopia!* The nerve of the old battle-ax, calling himself that! Whoever he was, Morgan'd queer his stupid game, and damn fast at that! He still had one up his sleeve. Let him try and get around this one—

They were inside the house. Leave it to Burbank; where a sale was concerned, he'd talk himself in and out of

a morgue. While Burbank sat down on a red plush couch without being invited, Morgan gazed around. He wasn't the least bit amazed. With a ridiculous guy like—well, Major Myopia, since he didn't know his real name—he expected anything. Huge animal heads, swords, guns, helmets, dances and hand-grenades hanging on the walls. Well, why not? If he'd seen human heads and crossed floormops, he'd accept that, too.

Major Myopia stood with his back to the cold fireplace. "Now get it over with," he snapped. "I'm a busy man. What is it?"

"Your daughter," Morgan began smoothly. "At least, I guess it's your daughter—"

"My—" Major Myopia choked to a stop, recovered. "Go on."

Morgan was rubbing his mental hands together. That had him stopped, he thought with satisfaction. Notice how the old crackpot gagged on that one? Too much for even him to swallow. Come on, Morgan—follow up with a haymaker!

"Your daughter"—he paused—"*Mazda* called up and said she wanted to see our folios. We sell the Foolproof Airplane, sir. By actual test, which can be confirmed by government experts, an ape can be taught to fly one with perfect safety. Our slogan is: 'Buy one and prove it!' "

Major Myopia was trembling. Even Morgan felt sorry for him, he looked so helpless in his agony. Then the old screwball burst out: "Mazda is my wife, you insulting jackanapes, and well you know it!" He stepped forward threateningly. "I'm of a mind to thrash the life out of you. I won't. I'll let you finish your slanders first. Go on, before I horsewhip you, sir!"

Morgan recoiled. "Why, blast your hide, you old liar—"

"Stop that this instant, Morgan!" Burbank cried, getting between them. He whispered: "Mess up this sale and you're out on your ear. Get that?"

Oh, nuts, Morgan thought. For a lousy baseball game! He had to eat. And if you think Burbank wouldn't fire him, you've never met a company man. The thing to do, obviously, was to be thrown out, but not—on the surface—through his own fault.

BURBANK had his hands behind his back and was slowly rocking up and down on his toes, an attitude that efficiently conveyed the threat he wanted Morgan to feel. Major Myopia stood near the fireplace. For the first time Morgan noticed a horsewhip dangling from the mantel. He swallowed.

"Mazda—" he began uncertainly.

"I'll thank you to refer to her as Mrs. Myopia!"

"Uh—Mrs. Myopia said she was interested in our product, and asked me to call with a set of our descriptive folders."

Burbank nodded, smiling expansively. "There, you see, Major. A simple error on this young blockhead's part. Nothing to be offended about. Your wife wants to buy our marvelous plane, that's all. Can't blame her, eh?"

"Whether I blame her or not, doesn't concern you. Keep your prying nose out of this." White mustache twitching, he faced Morgan. "Go on!"

"May I see Mrs. Myopia?"

"Indeed you may not! At least, until I find out what this is all about."

Despite his outward appearance, Morgan's brain was surprisingly acute. It took him only an instant to reason this out: Aged husband, young wife; husband sensitive and jealous, would believe anything; tell him a whopper, get tossed out—everything settled. Get rid of Burbank. In comparison with this situation, that'd be a cinch. Chances were, there was no Mrs. Myopia; just this old maniac who'd be calling himself Napoleon next.

"Surely you won't deprive her of something that would make her happy?" Burbank asked.

"I know my wife better than you do, sir. I suspect it would make her much too happy. What else did she say?" His self-control was amazing.

"If she likes our plane, a Mr. . uh . Harold Haze will arrange the—"

A shout of rage stopped him. "I thought so! Harold Haze! I knew that damn cur had his eye on my wife!" He paused, strangling with emotion; then rushed on in a hoarse, melodramatic whisper: "But I'll wreck his game, you can wager. They'll not escape me. Do you know why?" He eyed them, waiting for an answer. "Of course, you don't. Well, I have her locked in the dining room. She can't get out, and he can't get in. And neither can you. Now get the devil out of here, you blasted batteners on misery!"

"I'm sure you're mistaken—" Burbank protested.

"Out, you fool ghouls!"

"But your wife wouldn't—"

Major Myopia snatched the horsewhip and advanced. "I dragged her from England just to avoid that sneaking Lothario, that—that *Harold Haze!* And here he comes popping up again and you think she wouldn't! Get out of here! Try to reach her and I'll kill you with my naked hands."

Morgan opened the door before Burbank arrived there. Just before he slammed it on his infuriated host, he believed he heard something that could have been nothing but the sobbing of a soprano. However, a blur of legs streaking down the walk to the other side of the car seemed more important. With Burbank close behind, he chased it.

"What the hell's the idea?" he yelled. "Are you in on it, too?"

A fair-haired young man, clean shaven, with a large dimpled chin, and the conventional wide shoulders and slender waist and flanks of a hero, drew himself up to his full imposing height. "Discretion, my dear chap," he said in a musical baritone. "If the ancient blighter knew I was here, he'd only make poor Mazda suffer like the very deuce. But, I say, you two must help us. You can, you know. I shall pay you well, have no fear."

"Oh, go away," Morgan said.

Burbank, though, was highly interested. Clearly, a promotional scheme agitated his pitifully eager mind. "What is this all about, Mr—"

"Haze, Harold Haze. Judging from what I heard at the door, you know rather a good deal about Mazda and me. I love her. Her money has nothing at all to do with my vast love for her."

"Hasn't it?" Burbank asked.

"Not the slightest." Haze declared earnestly. "Myopia doesn't know it, but the fact is, that when the pater moves on, I shall inherit quite a bit more than he has. So the filthy lucre doesn't enter into it." He paused, and a pleading look came over his handsome, honest features. "Really, you must help us. You seem a pair of decent-enough chaps. No doubt you've been in love with unhappy women who unfortunately happened to be married to other men, generally bounders. I tell you, sir, Major Myopia is an unmitigated cad. He hates Mazda. Ah, I see you can scarcely believe it; but upon my word as a gentleman, I assure you he does. He hates her sufficiently to deny her a divorce, though she wouldn't ask a farthing alimony.

"Well, what choice have we?" He smiled faintly. "That was why we planned on escaping him in one of your amazing airplanes. Neither of us can manage the more technical ones, but if yours is so simple as the advertisements claim—there you are. Do you see?"

"I certainly do," Burbank said. "He does seem like a louse. What do you want us to do?"

"Help me steal poor Mazda out of the

house and sell us a plane and a rather uncomplicated map."

During all this, Morgan had been shifting about uneasily. When Burbank squared his shoulders manfully and declared: "O. K., count us in," he grew excited and cried: "Cut it out, boss. This is just a gag!"

Burbank drew him aside. "Don't be a fool," he whispered. "This'll make us. What publicity! They run away in a Foolproof Plane—and we fix it so Myopia chases them. The papers'll give us the one break we've been looking for. You know we can't convince people our planes're really foolproof; now they'll see anybody can handle one. Get the idea?"

"Yeah. But I tell you Myopia, Mazda, and this bird are just a lot—"

Burbank shoved him into the car and said to Harold Haze: "Leave it to me. You crouch down on the running board here."

WITH Haze hanging on the outside door handle, they drove halfway down the block and stopped, out of sight of Myopia's house. Then, very cautiously, though it happened to be bright daylight, they moved secretly across the lawns, darting from bush to hedge and squeezing along walls, until they were back at the Myopia stronghold.

In the shadow of the wall, protected by an overhanging window sill, Burbank gestured up. "Remember seeing the curtain move?" he asked Morgan. "I guess that's where he has his wife locked in. You're a big guy, Mr. Haze. Reach up and tap on the window."

A light dawned in Harold Haze's frank blue eyes. "I say," he whispered conspiratorially, "a capital idea. We'll hoist her down, what?"

"Yeah," Morgan grumbled, "and I get the hell out of here."

Burbank said in a hard undertone: "One false move and you're canned. Go through with it and I'll see you get a raise. Now what do you say?"

The latter was only slightly more attractive to Morgan. He knew Haze and Myopia for the madmen they were. But he realized that when heroic Haze rapped furtively on the window, there would be no reply, and then everything would be over with. So he nodded. In any case, events were suddenly developing with a tremendous burst of speed.

Haze reached up and tapped. Instantly, a lovely face pressed against the window; when it caught sight of Haze, an expression of agonized longing twisted it most becomingly, and the wide violet eyes dimmed mistily.

Haze made several mute gestures that the beautiful woman apparently understood, for she slid the window open very quietly. "Harold!" she said.

"Mazda, beloved!" Harold Haze breathed rapturously. "Come into my arms, my sweet one, and let me bear you away to sanctuary, what?"

"Righto!" she said. "Look out below." And, smiling tenderly, she swung her sleek legs over the sill and lowered herself into Harold's grasp, which was firm but gentle. They took a moment for a soft kiss; then she asked bravely: "Now what do we do?"

"We leave everything to these splendid fellows," Haze said.

"Trust me," Burbank stated. "Just walk out to the sidewalk as if nothing is happening."

Though they were all engaged in struggling through the hedges, Morgan contrived to look as if he were accidentally going the same way. But a loud crash of glass startled him. Burbank, of course, had heaved a rock through the glass fan above the door, which flung open immediately. From his safe position on the sidewalk, he thumbed his nose at the outraged major.

"My word," Haze said with disciplined frenzy, "I don't understand."

"Just a gesture," Burbank explained,

and refused to be shoved into a run. He marched very slowly, with great dignity, toward his car; which, as Morgan noted by turning his head excitedly, gave Myopia an opportunity to drag his chauffeur out of the house and into a car parked in the alley.

Only then did Burbank increase his pace. He helped the fleeing couple into the rear, settled himself behind the wheel, and waited for Morgan to slam the door. By the time he got the gears into first and crawled toward the corner, the major's car had whipped out of the driveway and after them.

"That was a devlish bit of recklessness," Mrs. Myopia said restrainedly. "It may cost us the game. Simpson is an awfully good driver."

"Rot, my dear. This is native terrain to our Galahads. We've twenty lengths on the bounder, and you may wager we'll increase the advantage—shan't we, old thing?"

"You bet," Burbank said cheerfully; but Morgan could detect no sign of a mad race. The branch manager kept at a pretty set distance from their pursuers, who seemed equally intent on not breaking the speed laws.

Mrs. Myopia said: "Silly, our talking so freely to you without an introduction, but you've been so awfully decent, don't you know; and I *would* like awfully to know if you have any plan of action."

"Sure. We'll put you in a plane. He can't get you then, can he?"

Mrs. Myopia shook her head firmly and Haze said: "I say, that's dashedly clever. Wasn't that your idea, Mazda, old girl? How on earth did they know about it?"

"We sell the Foolproofs, sir."

"I say, how silly of me. Of course! Have you any advertising matter?"

"Morgan!" Burbank said in a commanding tone; and Morgan drew out a set of folios which he handed back to the couple. He was past worrying about the baseball game. By this time they were out of the Bronx and well on the way to New Rochelle; at regular intervals they passed huge arrows reading:

FOOLPROOF FACTORY
AND AIRPORT
12 MILES

And so on, until they were less than five miles away from it. Meanwhile, Haze and Mrs. Myopia were highly interested in the photographs and cross sections.

"This duo-seater runabout seems just the thing," she said.

Morgan explained: "Cruising range, 1,000 miles. Cruising speed, 200."

"It does look attractive," Haze said. "But it's not at all cozy, if you understand what I mean. I mean to say the seats aren't together."

"But it's very reasonable, Harold."

Burbank interjected: "This is no time to think about expense."

"Quite," Haze agreed. "As you Americans say, nuts concerning the cost. I say, rather slangy, what? I much prefer the cabin cruiser."

"It *does* have hot and cold running water," Mazda admitted, "and that's quite tempting, besides ample room to pace about in."

"Cruising range, 2,000. Cruising speed, 250," Morgan stated. The game must be about half over. He couldn't get back in time, anyhow.

Haze said: "The price is $1,500 delivered, complete. How much would that be in money? I'll have to write a draft on the Bank of London."

"I'm simply awful in math, also," Mazda giggled. "At five dollars to the pound—or is it five pounds to the dollar, darling?"

"Five pounds," Haze said decisively. £7,500, what?"

Burbank choked and involuntarily stepped on the gas. "Make it an even

£1,500," he gagged. "I'll make it square with the office."

THIS transaction in high finance, which Haze completed by filling out a check and passing it to Burbank, didn't concern Morgan. He was gratified to note that Myopia's car had fallen back quite a distance. He had no great love for Haze or Mrs. Myopia; but his distaste for the major was considerably more vital. He knew there would be violence if they met.

Burbank increased the gap between. His car was much swifter; and, as he whispered to Morgan, he wanted time to bargain with Myopia and get some newspaper photographers on the scene. The reason didn't matter to Morgan, as long as the horsewhip remained far enough behind.

They entered the outskirts of New Rochelle at a fast clip. Myopia was out of sight, but with all the signs pointing toward their destination he couldn't lose his way.

"Attractive little hamlet," Mrs. Myopia said. "But what *is* that horrid factory marring the landscape?"

"Our plant and airport, maam," Burbank said with pride.

She grew less exacting. "Oh, is it? On close view, it's really nice."

"Awfully, nice," Haze added.

And, indeed, it was scarcely unpleasant, as they saw upon riding into the gardenlike airport between the horseshoe of factory and assembling plant, with the neat hangar, loading platform and railroad spur between.

Morgan followed them into the freight manager's office. The quickness with which Burbank slit red tape was almost enough to command his respect. A bill of sale was made out, and the couple made a brief tour of inspection. For a while Morgan feared Myopia would catch up: Mazda wanted a white plane sprayed violet to match her lovely eyes; Haze was willing; but Burbank convinced them the delay would be fatal. Morgan approved the word.

With more than his customary willingness to work, Morgan helped push the white cabin cruiser onto the field and stood by while Burbank explained the remakably simple controls to Haze.

"I say," the heroic but somewhat charming young man said through the control cabin window, "you've been fearfully decent about all this. I do hope you don't get into a frightful row with your company about the price. If you do, write to us in . uh . . . Walla Walla. Silly, what? But Mazda and I've always been awfully keen on seeing the place. Cheerio, old things!"

"Pip, pip, you darlings," Mrs. Myopia cried restrainedly, blowing a springly kiss. "Thanks most awfully."

Burbank waved the bank draft; Morgan waved with both hands, but with more emphasis, as if he were pushing them away. Just as Moypia's car came racing across the airport, the plane began a subdued roar. Its efficient levitators, which were the main factor in making it completely foolproof, dragged it up into the air, where it leveled off and darted away.

Gun in hand, Myopia burst out of his car and fired one futile shot at the disappearing plane.

"Get me one of your blasted airplanes!" he roared. *"Double time!"*

Burbank recoiled from the gun, but the major wasn't aiming at him. He seemed to have mistaken Morgan for the one in authority. Morgan was too cold, suddenly, to move from the black gaping hole of the gun.

"I'm sorry, sir," Burbank said, very politely. "We haven't another plane ready at the moment. If you'd care to wait—" And he began edging toward the office, where he imagined he could telephone for photographers.

Myopia, however, had stuffed the gun under his left armpit. He snatched out

a checkbook and fountain pen, and began scrawling. "How much?" he barked.

"Uh—fifteen hundred dollars, sir," Burbank said.

"Fourteen hundred, not a farthing more," the major snapped in his military voice, which nobody seemed able to contradict, particularly when he threw the check at Burbank and resumed menacing them with the gun.

"You," he said to Morgan, pointing the barrel without the slightest sign of senile shakiness, "get into that blue airplane and guide it."

Morgan, on the other hand, young as he was, did shake. "It's very easy to operate, sir. I'll show you how."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, you jackanapes. You'll run it for me. Now get inside and remember this scientific curiosity stuck in your ribs."

"I I don't think I will, sir."

Events were getting out of Burbank's control. Somehow he managed to shout: "But this isn't right, major. You're upsetting everything."

"You, sir, may go to hell—on the trot!" And he fired a bullet at Burbank's feet. The divot it blasted out of the ground did little to calm Morgan's nerves. He seemed unable to argue.

THE MAJOR helped Morgan into the pilot's seat and stood beside him, with the gun still nuzzling affectionately against his back. Morgan looked up at the reddish, domineernig face. He distinctly lacked admiration for the fierce white mustache; but that was not what impelled him to taxi the plane out of the hangar.

Major Myopia's pockets, he observed, were sinister bulges.

Consequently, he pressed the button that levitated the airplane. At seven hundred feet he leveled off and scooted after his quarry.

"If they escape," Myopia said in his usual conversational bellow, "you may blasted well say your dashed prayers."

"But it's a white plane, and it has a big head start—" Morgan said.

"Hah!" was all the major permitted himself to answer. Given a few moments to ponder it, Morgan found it sufficient. He gunned the plane to its capacity speed—three fifty m.p.h. At that rate it wouldn't be long.

It wasn't that Morgan lacked a heart. Under more normal, and safer, circumstances, he would have rooted for Mazda and Harold all the way. But the day had been disappointing: no baseball game, no easy afternoon in the office, no chance to pass a little time with the new typist and get her to invite him up to her house for supper.

Added to that was the unamusing rigidity of the gun stabbing him.

He was unhappy, and it was a choice between their lives and his. Not even that. Myopia wouldn't be able to do anything if they managed to catch the other plane; but he certainly could inconvenience Morgan, if only by accident.

Besides—

"You know," he said casually, "I don't believe you really exist."

Major Myopia went purple, but his eyes were disciplinedly worried. "Eh, what's that, you . . you blighter? Don't exist, don't I?"

Faced by the uncompromising stiffness of the gun, Morgan felt less certain of his strategy. But he had nothing to lose. Myopia would think a few times before killing his pilot, since he couldn't run the plane himself.

And there *were* factors in the question: "Nope," Morgan said. "I thought you up. Now I'm getting tired of this screwball stuff. Beat it!"

Myopia wavered. Looking up, Morgan decided that that was the proper term. He absolutely did waver; growing, in fact, rather nebulous around the edges. But he put up a formidable front.

"Don't try to confuse me, you silly

ass," he roared. The gun in his hand, incidentally, did not grow any softer. He resumed his former solidity. Therefore, Morgan kept driving forward at his tremendous speed without pressing his advantage.

"There they are!" Myopia cried.

Against the blue sky the white plane was easy to see. Morgan knew Haze couldn't match his expert piloting. He climbed; then nosed down in a steep, swift angle. In more experienced hands the other plane could have escaped, by swerving, looping in an Immelmann and heading off at top speed in the opposite direction, or grounding itself. It did nothing, however, except continue its suicidal forward flight; and Morgan had no difficulty in throttling down to a matching speed, keeping it well below and to the right.

Myopia went into instant action. He must have planned it well in advance. He smashed the window, being too impetuous to operate the patent foolproof lever, and jabbed his hand in a pocket.

Morgan shrank back when he pulled out a hand grenade. Ripping out the pin with his yellow horselike teeth, Myopia dropped it carefully at the other plane beneath. At that moment, Morgan flipped his plane aside, and the explosion, which Morgan had to admit was real enough, took place in empty air.

"That's enough," he said ominously. He reached around and snatched the gun out of Myopia's hand. "Now, jump or disappear. That door slides open."

Myopia stared pathetically at the muzzle, then at the ground far below. "We're we're so confoundedly high," he bleated.

"Take your pick," Morgan said coldly, waving the gun.

"I deuced well think I'd prefer vanishing," Myopia replied, becoming exceedingly misty.

A moment later Morgan sat alone in the cabin. The other plane moved on in its set straight course. He angled down and shouted: "Hey!" And he wasn't particularly astonished when there was no reply. In fact, nobody sat at the controls. He followed it for a short distance, not quite clear what to do; and then abandoned it, hoping its assorted foolproof gadgets could keep it clear of trees when it ran out of gas.

He wondered good-naturedly, what Burbank's precious bank drafts would look like, and whether there would actually be a hole in the fan above the door on Atlantic Place. Or, did the house exist?

It did, but it had been occupied for several years by a Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Cohen, who could never understand how the glass fan had become smashed.

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THE BRONZE DOOR

A fine bit of Moorish bronze-work, the door was—with unusual properties. As a back door to a harem, say, it was fine. But in an English town-house—

by RAYMOND CHANDLER

Illustrated by Kramer

THE little man was from the Calabar coast or from Papua or Tongatabu, some such remote place like that. An empire-builder frayed at the temples, thin and yellow, and slightly drunk at the club bar. And he was wearing a faded school tie he had probably kept year after year in a tin box so the centipedes wouldn't eat it.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish didn't know him, at least not then, but he knew the tie because it was his own school tie. So he spoke to the man timidly, and the man talked to him, being a little drunk and not knowing anybody. They had drinks and talked of the old school, in that peculiar, remote way the English have, without even exchanging names, but quite friendly underneath.

It was a big thrill for Mr. Sutton-Cornish, because nobody ever talked to him at the club except the servants. He was too defeated, too ingrowing, and you don't have to talk to people in London clubs. That's what they're for.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish got home to tea a little thick-tongued, for the first time in fifteen years. He sat there blankly in the upstairs drawing room, holding his cup of tepid tea and going over the man's face in his mind, making it younger and chubbier, a face that would go over an Eton collar or under a school cricket cap.

Suddenly he got it, and chuckled. That was something he hadn't done in a good few years either.

"Llewellyn, m'dear," he said. "Llewellyn Minor. Had an elder brother. Killed in the War, in the horse artillery."

Mrs. Sutton-Cornish stared at him bleakly across the heavily embroidered tea cozy. Her chestnut-colored eyes were dull with disdain—dried-out chestnuts, not fresh ones. The rest of her large face looked gray. The late October afternoon was gray, and the heavy, full-bottomed, monogrammed curtains across the windows. Even the ancestors on the walls were gray—all except the bad one, the general.

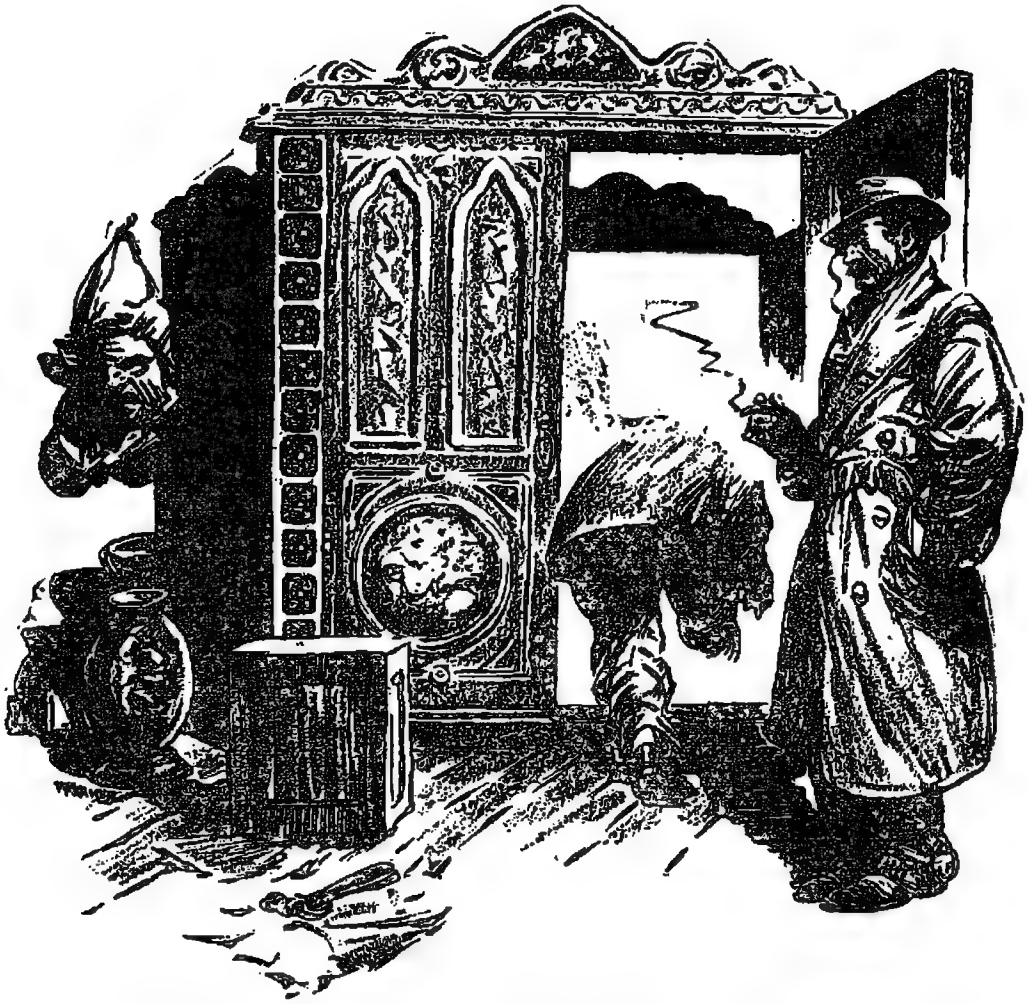
The chuckle died in Mr. Sutton-Cornish's throat. The long gray stare took care of that. Then he shivered a little, and as he wasn't very steady, his hand jerked. He emptied his tea on the rug, almost delicately, cup and all.

"Oh, rot," he said thickly. "Sorry, m'dear. Missed me trousers, though. Awfully sorry, m'dear."

FOR a full minute Mrs. Sutton-Cornish made only the sound of a large woman breathing. Then suddenly things began to tinkle on her—to tinkle and rustle and squeak. She was full of quaint noises, like a haunted house, but Mr. Sutton-Cornish shuddered, because he knew she was trembling with rage.

"Ah-h-h," she breathed out very, very slowly, after a long time, in her firing-squad manner. "Ah-h-h. Intoxicated, James?"

Something stirred suddenly at her feet. Teddy, the Pomeranian, stopped snoring and lifted his head and smelled blood. He let out a short snapping



Mr. Sutton-Cornish watched with some interest. Ah, yes. It happened again. The auctioneer stepped through, but failed to come out the other side.

bark, merely a ranging shot, and waddled to his feet. His protuberant brown eyes stared malignantly at Mr. Sutton-Cornish.

"I'd better ring the bell, m'dear," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said humbly, and stood up. "Hadn't I?"

She didn't answer him. She spoke to Teddy instead, softly. A sort of doughy softness, with something sadistic in it.

"Teddy," she said softly, "look at that man. Look at that man, Teddy."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish said thickly: "Now don't let him snap at me, m'dear. D-don't let him snap at me, please, m'dear."

No answer. Teddy braced himself and leered. Mr. Sutton-Cornish tore his eyes away and looked up at the bad ancestor, the general. The general wore a scarlet coat with a diagonal blue sash across it,-rather like a bar sinister. He had the winy complexion generals used to have in his day. He had a lot of very fruity-looking decorations and a bold stare, the stare of an unrepentant sinner. The general was no violet. He

had broken up more homes than he had fought duels, and he had fought more duels than he had won battles, and he had won plenty of battles.

Looking up at the bold-veined face Mr. Sutton-Cornish braced himself, leaned down and took a small triangular sandwich from the tea table.

"Here, Teddy," he gulped. "Catch, boy, catch!"

He threw the sandwich. It fell in front of Teddy's little, brown paws. Teddy snuffled it languidly and yawned. He had his meals served to him on china, not thrown at him. He sidled innocently over to the edge of the rug and suddenly pounced on it, snarling.

"At table, James?" Mrs. Sutton-Cornish said slowly and dreadfully.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish stood on his teacup. It broke into thin light slivers of fine china. He shuddered again.

But now was the time. He started quickly toward the bell. Teddy let him get almost there, still pretending to worry the fringe of the rug. Then he spit out a piece of fringe, and charged low and soundlessly, his small feet like feathers in the nap of the rug. Mr. Sutton-Cornish was just reaching for the bell.

Small bright teeth tore rapidly and expertly at a pearl-gray spat.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish yelped, pivoted swiftly—and kicked. His neat shoe flashed in the gray light. A silky brown object sailed through the air and landed gobbling.

Then there was a quite indescribable stillness in the room, like the silence in the innermost room of a cold-storage warehouse, at midnight.

Teddy whimpered once, artfully, crept along the floor with his body close to it, crept under Mrs. Sutton-Cornish's chair. Her purplish-brown skirts moved and Teddy's face emerged slowly, framed in silk, the face of a nasty old woman with a shawl over her head.

"Caught me off balance," Mr. Sutton-Cornish mumbled, leaning against the mantelpiece. "Didn't mean. never intended—"

Mrs. Sutton-Cornish rose. She rose with the air of gathering a retinue about her. Her voice was the cold bleat of a foghorn on an icy river.

"Chinverly," she said. "I shall leave at once for Chinverly. At once. This hour. . Drunk! Filthily drunk in the middle of the afternoon. Kicking little inoffensive animals. Vile! Utterly vile! *Open the door!*"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish staggered across the room and opened the door. She went out. Teddy trotted beside her, on the side away from Mr. Sutton-Cornish, and for once he didn't try to trip her in the doorway.

Outside she turned, slowly, as a liner turns.

"James," she said, "have you anything to say to me?"

He giggled—from pure nervous strain.

She looked at him horribly, turned again, said over her shoulder: "This is the end, James. The end of our marriage."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish said appallingly: "Goodness, m'dear—are we married?"

She started to turn again, but didn't. A sound like somebody being strangled in a dungeon came from her. Then she went on.

The door of the room hung open like a paralyzed mouth. Mr. Sutton-Cornish stood just inside it, listening. He didn't move until he heard steps on the floor above—heavy steps—hers. He sighed and looked down at his torn spat. Then he crept downstairs, into his long, narrow study beside the entrance hall, and got at the whiskey.

He hardly noticed the sounds of departure, luggage being descended, voices, the throbbing of the big car out in front, voices, the last bark from Teddy's

iron-old throat. The house grew utterly silent. The furniture waited with its tongue in its cheek. Outside the lamps were lit in a light fog. Taxis hooted along the wet street. The fire died low in the grate.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish stood in front of it, swaying a little, looking at his long gray face in the wall mirror.

"Take a little stroll," he whispered wryly. "You and me. Never was anyone else, was there?"

He sneaked out into the hall without Collins, the butler, hearing him. He got his scarf and overcoat and hat on, grasped his stick and gloves, let himself out silently into the dusk.

He stood a little while at the bottom of the steps and looked up at the house. No. 14 Grinling Crescent. His father's house, his grandfather's house, his great-grandfather's house. All he had left. The rest was hers. Even the clothes he wore, the money in his bank account. But the house was still his—at least in name.

Four white steps, as spotless as the souls of virgins, leading up to an apple-green, deep-paneled door, painted as things used to be painted long ago, in the age of leisure. It had a brass knocker and a thumb latch above the handle and one of those bells you twisted, instead of pushing or pulling them, and it rang just on the other side of the door, rather ridiculously, if you were not used to it.

He turned and looked across the street at the little railed-in park always kept locked, where on sunny days the small, prim children of Grinling Crescent walked along the smooth paths, around the little ornamental lake, beside the rhododendron bushes, holding the hands of their nursemaids.

He looked at all this a little wanly, then he squared his thin shoulders and marched off into the dusk, thinking of Nairobi and Papua and Tongatabu, thinking of the man in the faded school tie who would go back there presently, wherever it was he came from, and lie awake in the jungle, thinking of London.

II.

"Keb, sir?"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish halted, stood on the edge of the curb and stared. The voice came from above, one of those wind-husked, beery voices you don't hear very often any more. It came from the driver's seat of a hansom cab.

The hansom cab had come out of the darkness, sliding oilily along the street on high rubber-tired wheels, the horse's hoofs making a slow, even *clop-clop* that Mr. Sutton-Cornish hadn't noticed until the driver called down to him.

It looked real enough. The horse had time-worn black blinkers and the characteristic well-fed and yet somehow dilapidated look that cab horses used to have. The half doors of the hansom were folded back and Mr. Sutton-Cornish could see the quilted gray upholstery inside. The long reins were riddled with cracks and following them upward he saw the beefy driver, the wide-brimmed coachman's "topper" he wore, the huge buttons on the upper part of his greatcoat, and the well-worn blanket that swathed the lower part of him round and round. He held his long whip lightly and delicately, as a hansom driver should hold his whip.

The trouble was that there weren't any more hansom cabs.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish gulped, slipped a glove off and reached out to touch the wheel. It was cold, very solid, wet with the muddy slime of the city streets.

"Doubt if I've seen one of these since the War," he said out loud, very steadily.

"Wot war, guv'nor?"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish started. He touched the wheel again. Then he

smiled, slowly and carefully drew his glove on again.

"I'm getting in," he said.

"Steady there, Prince," the driver wheezed.

The horse switched his long tail contemptuously. Telling *him* to be steady. Mr. Sutton-Cornish climbed in over the wheel, rather clumsily, because one had lost the knack of that art these many years. He closed the half doors around in front of him, leaned back against the seat in the pleasant harness-room smell.

The trap opened over his head and the driver's large nose and alcoholic eyes made an improbable picture in the opening, like a deep-sea fish staring you down through the glass wall of an aquarium.

"Where to, guv'nor?"

"Well . Soho." It was the most foreign place he could think of—for a hansom cab to go to.

The cabman's eyes stared down at him.

"Won't like it there, guv'nor.. Too many dagoes."

"I don't have to like it," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said bitterly.

The cabman stared down at him a little longer. "Yus," he said. "Soho. Wardour Street like. Right you are, guv'nor."

THE TRAP slammed shut, the whip flicked delicately beside the horse's right ear, and motion came to the hansom cab.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish sat perfectly still, his scarf tight around his thin neck and his stick between his knees and his gloved hands clasped on the crook of the stick. He stared mutely out into the mist, like an admiral on the bridge. The horse *clop-clopped* out of Grinling Crescent, through Belgrave Square, over to Whitehall, up to Trafalgar Square, across that to St. Martin's Lane..

It went neither fast nor slow, and yet it went as fast as anything else went. It moved without sound, except for the *clop-clop,* across a world that stank of gasoline fumes and charred oil, that shrilled with whistles and hooted with horns.

And nobody seemed to notice it and nothing seemed to get in its way. That was rather amazing, Mr. Sutton-Cornish thought. But after all a hansom cab had nothing to do with that world. It was a ghost, an underlayer of time, the first writing on a palimpsest, brought out by ultraviolet light in a darkened room.

"Y'know," he said, speaking to the horse's rump, because there wasn't anything else there to speak to, "things might happen to a man, if a man would just let them happen."

The long whip flicked by Prince's ear, as lightly as a trout fly flicking at a small dark pool under a rock.

"They already have," he added glumly.

The cab slowed along a curb, and the trap snapped open again.

"Well, 'ere we are, guv'nor. 'Ow about one of them little French dinners for eighteen pence? You know, guv'nor. Six courses of nothink at all. You 'ave one on me and then I 'ave one on you and we're still 'ungry. 'Ow about it?"

A very chill hand clutched at Mr. Sutton-Cornish's heart. Six-course dinners for eighteen pence? A hansom cab driver who said: "Wot war, guv'nor?" Twenty years ago, perhaps—

"Let me out here!" he said shrilly.

He threw the doors open, thrust money up at the face in the trap, hopped over the wheel to the sidewalk.

HE DIDN'T quite run, but he walked pretty fast and close to a dark wall and a little slinkingly. But nothing followed him, not even the *clop-clop* of the horse's hoofs. He swung around a corner into a narrow crowded street.

The light came from the open door

of a shop. "Curios and Antiques" it said on the façade, in letters once gold, heavily Gothic in style. There was a flare on the sidewalk to attract attention and by this light he read the sign. The voice came from inside, from a little, plump man standing on a box who chanted over the heads of a listless crowd of silent, bored, foreign-looking men. The chanting voice held a note of exhaustion and futility.

"Now what am I bid, gents? Now what am I bid on this magnificent example of Oriental art? One pound starts the ball rolling, gents. One pound note coin of the realm. Now, 'oo says a pound, gents. 'Oo says a pound?"

Nobody said anything. The little plump man on the box shook his head, wiped his face with a dirty handkerchief and drew a long breath. Then he saw Mr. Sutton-Cornish standing on the fringe of the little crowd.

"'Ow about you, sir?" he pounced. "You look as if you'd a country 'ouse. Now that door's made for a country 'ouse. 'Ow about you, sir? Just give me a start like."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish blinked at him. "Eh? What's that?" he snapped.

The listless men smiled faintly and spoke among themselves without moving their thick lips.

"No offense, sir," the auctioneer chirped. "If you did 'ave a country 'ouse, that there door might be just what you could use."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish turned his head slowly, following the auctioneer's pointing hand, and looked for the first time at the bronze door.

III.

It stood all by itself over against the left-hand wall of the nearly stripped shop. It stood about two feet out from the side wall, on its own base. It was a double door, apparently of cast bronze, although from its size that seemed impossible. It was heavily scrolled over with a welter of Arabic script in relief, an endless story that here found no listener, a procession of curves and dots that might have expressed anything from an anthology of the Koran to the by-laws of a well-organized harem.

The two leaves of the door were only part of the thing. It had a wide, heavy base below and a superstructure topped by a Moorish arch. From the meeting edge of the two leaves a huge key stuck out of a huge keyhole, the sort of key a medieval jailer used to wear in enormous clanking bunches on a leather belt around his waist. A key from "The Yeoman of the Guard"—a comic-opera key.

"Oh . . . that," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said in the stillness. "Well, really, you know. I'm afraid not that, you know."

The auctioneer sighed. No hope had ever been smaller, probably, but at least it was worth a sigh. Then he picked up something which might have been carved ivory, but wasn't, stared at it pessimistically, and burst out again:

"Now 'ere, gents, I 'old in my 'and one of the finest examples—"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish smiled faintly and skimmed along the cluster of men until he came close to the bronze door.

He stood in front of it leaning on his stick, which was a section of polished rhinoceros hide over a steel core, dull mahogany in color, and a stick even a heavy man could have leaned on. After a while he reached forward idly and twisted the great key. It turned stubbornly, but it turned. A ring beside it was the doorknob. He twisted that, too, and tugged one half of the door open.

He straightened, and with a pleasantly idle gesture thrust his stick forward through the opening. And then, for the second time that evening, something incredible happened to him.

He wheeled sharply. Nobody was paying any attention. The auction was dead on its feet. The silent men were

drifting out into the night. In a pause, hammering sounded at the back of the shop. The plump little auctioneer looked more and more as if he were eating a bad egg.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish looked down at his gloved right hand. There was no stick in it. There was nothing in it. He stepped to one side and looked behind the door. There was no stick there, on the dusty floor.

He had felt nothing. Nothing had jerked at him. The stick had merely passed part way through the door and then—it had merely ceased to exist.

He leaned down and picked up a piece of torn paper, wadded it swiftly into a ball, glanced behind him again and tossed the ball through the open part of the door.

Then he let out a slow sigh in which some neolithic rapture struggled with his civilized amazement. The ball of paper didn't fall to the floor behind the door. It fell, in midair, clean out of the visible world.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish reached his empty right hand forward and very slowly and carefully pushed the door shut. Then he just stood there, and licked his lips.

After a while: "Harem door," he said very softly. "Exit door of a harem. Now, that's an idea."

A very charming idea, too. The silken lady, her night of pleasure with the sultan over, would be conducted politely to that door and would casually step through it. Then nothing. No sobbing in the night, no broken hearts, no blackamoor with cruel eyes and a large scimitar, no knotted silk cord, no blood, no dull splash in the midnight Bosphorus. Merely nothing. A cool, clean, perfectly timed, and perfectly irrevocable absence of existence. Someone would close the door and lock it and take the key out, and for the time being that would be that.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish didn't notice the emptying of the shop. Faintly he heard its street door close, but without giving it any meaning. The hammering at the back stopped for a moment, voices spoke. Then steps came near. They were weary steps in the silence, the steps of a man who had had enough of that day, and of many such days. A voice spoke at Mr. Sutton-Cornish's elbow, an end-of-the-day voice.

"A very fine piece of work, sir. A bit out of my line—to be frank with you."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish didn't look at him, not yet. "Quite a bit out of anybody's line," he said gravely.

"I see it interests you, sir, after all."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish turned his head slowly. Down on the floor, off his box, the auctioneer was a mere wisp of a man. A shabby, unpressed red-eyed little man who had found life no picnic.

"Yes, but what would one *do* with it?" Mr. Sutton-Cornish asked throatily.

"Well—it's a door like any other, sir. Bit 'eavy. Bit queerlike. But still a door like any other."

"I wonder," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said, still throatily.

The auctioneer gave him a swift appraising glance, shrugged and gave it up. He sat down on an empty box, lit a cigarette and relaxed sloppily into private life.

"What are you asking for it?" Mr. Sutton-Cornish inquired, quite suddenly. "What are you asking for it, Mr.—"

"Skimp, sir. Josiah Skimp. Well, a twenty-pound note, sir? Bronze alone ought to be worth that for art work." The little man's eyes were glittering again.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish nodded absently. "I don't know much about that," he said.

" 'Ell of a lot of it, sir." Mr. Skimp hopped off his box, pattered over and heaved the leaf of the door open, grunting. "Beats me 'ow it ever got 'ere.

For seven footers. No door for shrimps like me. Look, sir."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish had a rather ghastly presentiment, of course. But he didn't do anything about it. He couldn't. His tongue stuck in his throat and his legs were like ice. The comical contrast between the massiveness of the door and his own wisp of a body seemed to amuse Mr. Skimp. His little, round face threw back the shadow of a grin. Then he lifted his foot and hopped.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish watched him—as long as there was anything to watch. In fact he watched much longer. The hammering at the back of the shop seemed to get quite thunderous in the silence.

ONCE MORE, after a long time, Mr. Sutton-Cornish bent forward and closed the door. This time he twisted the key and dragged it out and put it in his overcoat pocket.

"Got to do something," he mumbled. "Got to do— Can't let this sort of thing—" His voice trailed off and then he jerked violently, as though a sharp pain had shot through him. Then he laughed out loud, off key. Not a natural laugh. Not a very nice laugh.

"That was beastly," he said under his breath. "But amazingly funny."

He was still standing there rooted when a pale young man with a hammer appeared at his elbow.

"Mr. Skimp step out, sir—or did you notice? We're supposed to be closed up, sir."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish didn't look at the pale young man with the hammer. Moving a clammy tongue he said:

"Yes Mr. Skimp stepped out."

The young man started to turn away. Mr. Sutton-Cornish made a gesture. "I've bought this door—from Mr. Skimp," he said. "Twenty pounds. Will you take the money—and my card?"

The pale young man beamed, delighted at personal contact with a sale. Mr. Sutton-Cornish drew out a note case, extracted four five-pound notes from it, also a formal calling card. He wrote on the card with a small, gold pencil. His hand seemed surprisingly steady.

"No. 14 Grinling Crescent," he said. "Have it sent tomorrow without fail. It's . it's very heavy. I shall pay the drayage, of course. Mr. Skimp will—" His voice trailed off again. Mr. Skimp wouldn't.

"Oh, that's all right, sir. Mr. Skimp is my uncle."

"Ah, that's too— I mean, well, take this ten-shilling note for yourself, won't you?"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish left the shop rather rapidly, his right hand clutching the big key down in his pocket.

An ordinary taxi took him home to dinner. He dined alone—after three whiskeys. But he wasn't as much alone as he looked. He never would be any more.

IV.

IT CAME the next day, swathed in sacking and bound about with cords, looking like nothing on earth and conducting itself with rather less agility than a concert grand.

Four large men in leather aprons perspired it up the four front steps and into the hall, with a good deal of sharp language back and forth. They had a light hoist to help them get it off their dray, but the steps almost beat them. Once inside the hall they got it on two dollies and after that it was just an average heavy, grunting job. They set it up at the back of Mr. Sutton-Cornish's study, across a sort of alcove he had an idea about.

He tipped them liberally, they went away, and Collins, the butler, left the

front door open for a while to air the place through.

Carpenters came. The sacking was stripped off, and a framework was built around the door, so that it became part of a partition wall across the alcove. A small door was set in the partition. When the work was done and the mess cleared up Mr. Sutton-Cornish asked for an oilcan, and locked himself into his study. Then and only then he got out the big bronze key and fitted it again into the huge lock and opened the bronze door wide, both sides of it.

He oiled the hinges from the rear, just in case. Then he shut it again and oiled the lock, removed the key and went for a good long walk, in Kensington Gardens, and back. Collins and the first parlormaid had a look at it while he was out. Cook hadn't been upstairs yet.

"Beats me what the old fool's after," the butler said stonily. "I give him another week, Bruggs. If *she's* not back by then, I give him my notice. How about you, Bruggs?"

"Let him have his fun," Bruggs said, tossing her head. "That old sow he's married to—"

"Bruggs!"

"Tit-tat to you, Mr. Collins," Bruggs said, and flounced out of the room.

Mr. Collins remained long enough to sample the whiskey in the big square decanter on Mr. Sutton-Cornish's smoking table.

In a shallow, tall cabinet in the alcove behind the bronze door, Mr. Sutton-Cornish arranged a few odds and ends of old china and bric-a-brac and carved ivory and some idols in shiny black wood, very old and unnecessary. It wasn't much of an excuse for so massive a door. He added three statuettes in pink marble. The alcove still had an air of not being quite on to itself. Naturally the bronze door was never open unless the room door was locked.

In the morning Bruggs, or Mary, the housemaid dusted in the alcove, having entered, of course, by the partition door. That amused Mr. Sutton-Cornish slightly, but the amusement began to wear thin. It was about three weeks after his wife and Teddy left that something happened to brighten him up.

A LARGE, tawny man with a waxed mustache and steady gray eyes called on him and presented a card that indicated he was Detective-sergeant Thomas Lloyd of Scotland Yard. He said that one Josiah Skimp, an auctioneer, living at Kennington, was missing from his home to the great concern of his family, and that his nephew, one George William Hawkins, also of Kennington, had happened to mention that Mr. Sutton-Cornish was present in a shop in Soho on the very night when Mr. Skimp vanished. In fact Mr. Sutton-Cornish might even have been the last person known to have spoken to Mr. Skimp.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish laid out the whiskey and cigars, placed his fingertips together and nodded gravely.

"I recall him perfectly, sergeant. In fact I bought that funny door over there from him. Quaint, isn't it?"

The detective glanced at the bronze door, a brief and empty glance.

"Out of my line, sir, I'm afraid. I do recall now something was said about the door. They had quite a job moving it. Very smooth whiskey, sir. Very smooth indeed."

"Help yourself, sergeant. So Mr. Skimp has run off and lost himself. Sorry I can't help you. I really didn't know him, you know."

The detective nodded his large tawny head. "I didn't think you did, sir. The Yard only got the case a couple of days ago. Routine call, you know. Did he seem excited, for instance?"

"He seemed tired," Mr. Sutton-Cornish mused. "Very fed up—with the whole business of auctioneering, perhaps. I only spoke to him a

moment. About that door, you know. A nice little man—but tired."

The detective didn't bother to look at the door again. He finished his whiskey and allowed himself a little more.

"No family trouble," he said. "Not much money, but who has these days? No scandal. Not a melancholy type, they say. Odd."

"Some very queer types in Soho," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said mildly.

The detective thought it over. "Harmless, though. A rough district once, but not in our time. Might I ask what you was doing over there, sir?"

"Wandering," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said. "Just wandering. A little more of this?"

"Well, now, really, sir, three whiskeys in a morning well, just this once and many thanks to you, sir."

Detective-sergeant Lloyd left—rather regretfully.

After he had been gone ten minutes or so, Mr. Sutton-Cornish got up and locked the study door. He walked softly down the long, narrow room and got the big bronze key out of his inside breast pocket, where he always carried it now.

The door opened noiselessly and easily now. It was well-balanced for its weight. He opened it wide, both sides of it.

"Mr. Skimp," he said very gently into the emptiness, "you are wanted by the police, Mr. Skimp."

The fun of that lasted him well on to lunch time.

V.

In the afternoon Mrs. Sutton-Cornish came back. She appeared quite suddenly before him in the study, sniffed harshly at the smell of tobacco and Scotch, refused a chair, and stood very solid and lowering just inside the closed door. Teddy stood beside her for a moment, then hurled himself at the edge of the rug.

"Stop that, you little beast. Stop that at once, darling," Mrs. Sutton-Cornish said. She picked Teddy up and stroked him. He lay in her arms and licked her nose and sneered at Mr. Sutton-Cornish.

"I find," Mrs. Sutton-Cornish said, in a voice that had the brittleness of dry suet, "after numerous very boring interviews with my solicitor, that I can do nothing without your help. Naturally I dislike asking for that."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish made ineffectual motions toward a chair and when they were ignored he leaned resignedly against the mantelpiece. He said he supposed that was so.

"Perhaps it has escaped your attention that I am still comparatively a young woman. And these are modern days, James."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish smiled wanly and glanced at the bronze door. She hadn't noticed it yet. Then he put his head on one side and wrinkled his nose and said mildly, without much interest:

"You're thinking of a divorce?"

"I'm thinking of very little else," she said brutally.

"And you wish me to compromise myself in the usual manner, at Brighton, with a lady who will be described in court as an actress?"

She glared at him. Teddy helped her glare. Their combined glare failed even to perturb Mr. Sutton-Cornish. He had other resources now.

"Not with that dog," he said carelessly, when she didn't answer.

She made some kind of furious noise, a snort with a touch of snarl in it. She sat down then, very slowly and heavily, a little puzzled. She let Teddy jump to the floor.

"Just what are you talking about, James?" she asked witheringly.

He strolled over to the bronze door, leaned his back against it and explored its rich protuberances with a fingertip. Even then she didn't see the door.

"You want a divorce, my dear

Louella," he said slowly, "so that you may marry another man. There's absolutely no point in it—with that dog. I shouldn't be asked to humiliate myself. Too useless. No man would marry that dog."

"James—are you attempting to blackmail me?" Her voice was rather dreadful. She almost bugled. Teddy sneaked across to the window curtains and pretended to lie down.

"And even if he would," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said with a peculiar quiet in his tone, "I oughtn't to make it possible. I ought to have enough human compassion—"

"James! How dare you! You make me physically sick with your insincerity!"

For the first time in his life James Sutton-Cornish laughed in his wife's face.

"Those are two or three of the silliest speeches I ever had to listen to," he said. "You're an elderly, ponderous and damn dull woman. Go out and buy yourself a gigolo, if you want someone to fawn on you. But don't ask me to make a beast of myself so that he can marry you and throw me out of my father's house. Now run along and take your miserable brown beetle with you."

She got up quickly, very quickly for her, and stood a moment almost swaying. Her eyes were as blank as a blind man's eyes. In the silence Teddy tore fretfully at a curtain, with bitter, preoccupied growls that neither of them noticed.

She said very slowly and almost gently: "We'll see how long you stay in your father's house, James Sutton-Cornish—*pauper*."

She moved very quickly the short distance to the door, went through and slammed it behind her.

The slamming of the door, an unusual event in that household, seemed to awaken a lot of echoes that had not been called upon to perform for a long time. So that Mr. Sutton-Cornish was not instantly aware of the small peculiar sound at his own side of the door, a mixture of sniffing and whimpering, with just a dash of growl.

Teddy. Teddy hadn't made the door. The sudden, bitter exit had for once caught him napping. Teddy was shut in—with Mr. Sutton-Cornish.

For a little while Mr. Sutton-Cornish watched him rather absently, still shaken by the interview, not fully realizing what had happened. The small, wet, black snout explored the crack at the bottom of the closed door. At moments, while the whimpering and sniffing went on, Teddy turned a reddish brown outjutting eye, like a fat wet marble, toward the man he hated.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish snapped out of it rather suddenly. He straightened and beamed. "Well, well, old man," he purred. "Here we are, and for once without the ladies."

Cunning dawned in his beaming eye. Teddy read it and slipped off under a chair. He was silent now, very silent. And Mr. Sutton-Cornish was silent as he moved swiftly along the wall and turned the key in the study door. Then he sped back toward the alcove, dug the key of the bronze door out of his pocket, unlocked and opened that—wide.

He sauntered back toward Teddy, beyond Teddy, as far as the window. He grinned at Teddy.

"Here we are, old man. Jolly, eh? Have a shot of whiskey, old man?"

Teddy made a small sound under the chair, and Mr. Sutton-Cornish sidled toward him delicately, bent down suddenly and lunged. Teddy made another chair, farther up the room. He breathed hard and his eyes stuck out rounder and wetter than ever, but he was silent, except for his breathing. And Mr. Sutton-Cornish, stalking him patiently from chair to chair was as silent as the last

leaf of autumn, falling in slow eddies in a windless copse.

At about that time the doorknob turned sharply. Mr. Sutton-Cornish paused to smile and click his tongue. A sharp knock followed. He ignored it. The knocking went on sharper and sharper and an angry voice accompanied it.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish went on stalking Teddy. Teddy did the best he could, but the room was narrow and Mr. Sutton-Cornish was patient and rather agile when he wanted to be. In the interests of agility he was quite willing to be undignified.

The knocking and calling out beyond the door went on, but inside the room things could only end one way. Teddy reached the sill of the bronze door, sniffed at it rapidly, almost lifted a contemptuous hind leg, but didn't because Mr. Sutton-Cornish was too close to him. He sent a low snarl back over his shoulder and hopped that disastrous sill.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish raced back to the room door, turned the key swiftly and silently, crept over to a chair and sprawled in it laughing. He was still laughing when Mrs. Sutton-Cornish thought to try the knob again, found the door yielded this time, and stormed into the room. Through the mist of his grisly, solitary laughter he saw her cold stare, then he heard her rustling about the room, heard her calling Teddy.

Then, "What's that thing?" he heard her snap suddenly. "What utter foolishness— Teddy! Come, mother's little lamb! Come, Teddy!"

Even in his laughter Mr. Sutton-Cornish felt the wing of a regret brush his cheek. Poor little Teddy. He stopped laughing and sat up, stiff and alert. The room was too quiet.

"Louella!" he called sharply.

No sound answered him.

He closed his eyes, gulped, opened them again, crept along the room staring. He stood in front of his little alcove for a long time, peering, peering through that bronze portal at the innocent little collection of trivia beyond.

He locked the door with quivering hands, stuffed the key down in his pocket, poured himself a stiff peg of whiskey.

A ghostly voice that sounded something like his own, and yet unlike it, said out loud, very close to his ear:

"I didn't really intend anything like that never never . oh, never . . or ."—after a long pause—"did I?"

Braced by the Scotch he sneaked out into the hall and out of the front door without Collins seeing him. No car waited outside. As luck would have it she had evidently come up from Chinverly by train and taken a taxi. Of course they could trace the taxi—later on, when they tried. A lot of good that would do them.

Collins was next. He thought about Collins for some time, glancing at the bronze door, tempted a good deal, but finally shaking his head negatively.

"Not that way," he muttered. "Have to draw the line somewhere. Can't have a procession—"

He drank some more whiskey and rang the bell. Collins made it rather easy for him.

"You rang, sir?"

"What did it sound like?" Mr. Sutton-Cornish asked, a little thick-tongued. "Canaries?"

Collins' chin snapped back a full two inches.

"The dowager won't be here to dinner, Collins. I think I'll dine out. That's all."

Collins stared at him. A grayness spread over Collins' face, with a little flush at the cheekbones.

"You allude to Mrs. Sutton-Cornish, sir?"

Mr. Sutton-Cornish hiccuped. "Who d'you suppose? Gone back to Chinverly

to stew in her own juice some more. Ought to be plenty of it."

With deadly politeness Collins said: "I had meant to ask you, sir, whether Mrs. Sutton-Cornish would return here —permanently. Otherwise—"

"Carry on." Another hiccup.

"Otherwise I should not care to remain myself, sir."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish stood up and went close to Collins and breathed in his face. Haig & Haig. A good breath, of the type.

"Get out!" he rasped. "Get out now! Upstairs with you and pack your things. Your check will be ready for you. A full month. Thirty-two pounds in all, I believe?"

Collins stepped back and moved toward the door. "That will suit me perfectly, sir. Thirty-two pounds is the correct amount." He reached the door, spoke again before he opened it. "A reference from *you,* sir, will not be desired."

He went out, closing the door softly.

"Ha!" Mr. Sutton-Cornish said.

Then he grinned slyly, stopped pretending to be angry or drunk, and sat down to write the check.

He dined out that night, and the next night, and the next. Cook left on the third day, taking the kitchenmaid with her. That left Bruggs and Mary, the housemaid. On the fifth day Bruggs wept when she gave her notice.

"I'd rather go at once, sir, if you'll let me," she sobbed. "There's something creepylike about the house since cook and Mr. Collins and Teddy and Mrs. Sutton-Cornish left."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish patted her arm. "Cook and Mr. Collins and Teddy and Mrs. Sutton-Cornish," he repeated. "If only she could hear *that* order of precedence."

Bruggs stared at him, red-eyed. He patted her arm again. "Quite all right, Bruggs. I'll give you your month. And tell Mary to go, too. Think I'll close the house up and live in the south of France for a while. Now don't cry, Bruggs."

"No, sir." She bawled her way out of the room.

He didn't go to the south of France, of course. Too much fun being right where he was—alone at last in the home of his fathers. Not quite what they would have approved of, perhaps, except possibly the general. But the best he could do.

Almost overnight the house began to have the murmurs of an empty place. He kept the windows closed and the shades down. That seemed to be a gesture of respect he could hardly afford to omit.

VI.

Scotland Yard moves with the deadly dependability of a glacier, and at times almost as slowly. So it was a full month and nine days before Detective-sergeant Lloyd came back to No. 14 Grinling Crescent.

By that time the front steps had long since lost their white serenity. The apple-green door had acquired a sinister shade of gray. The brass saucer around the bell, the knocker, the big latch, all these were tarnished and stained, like the brass work of an old freighter limping around the Horn. Those who rang the bell departed slowly, with backward glances, and Mr. Sutton-Cornish would be peeping out at them from the side of a drawn window shade.

He concocted himself weird meals in the echoing kitchen, creeping in after dark with ragged-looking parcels of food. Later he would slink out again with his hat pulled low and his overcoat collar up, give a quick glance up and down the street, then scramble off around the corner. The police constable on duty saw him occasionally at these maneuvers and rubbed his chin a good deal over the situation.

No longer a study even in withered

elegance, Mr. Sutton-Cornish became a customer in obscure eating houses where draymen blew their soup on naked tables in compartments like horse stalls; in foreign cafés when men with blue-black hair and pointed shoes dined interminably over minute bottles of wine; in crowded, anonymous tea shops where the food looked and tasted as tired as the people who ate it.

He was no longer a perfectly sane man. In his dry, solitary, poisoned laughter there was the sound of crumbling walls. Even the pinched loafers under the arches of the Thames Embankment, who listened to him because he had sixpences, even these were glad when he passed on, stepping carefully in unshined shoes and lightly swinging the stick he no longer carried.

Then, late one night, returning softly out of the dull-gray darkness, he found the man from Scotland Yard lurking near the dirty front steps with an air of thinking himself hidden behind a lamp-post.

"I'd like a few words with you, sir," he said, stepping, forth briskly and holding his hands as though he might have to use them suddenly.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Mr. Sutton-Cornish chuckled. "Trot right in."

He opened the door with his latch-key, switched the light on, and stepped with accustomed ease over a pile of dusty letters on the floor.

"Got rid of the servants," he explained to the detective. "Always did want to be alone some day."

The carpet was covered with burned matches, pipe ash, torn paper, and the corners of the hall had cobwebs in them. Mr. Sutton-Cornish opened his study door, switched the light on in there and stood aside. The detective passed him warily, staring hard at the condition of the house.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish pushed him into a dusty chair, thrust a cigar at him, reached for the whiskey decanter.

"Business or pleasure this time?" he inquired archly.

Detective-sergeant Lloyd held his hard hat on one knee and looked the cigar over dubiously. "Smoke it later, thank you, sir. Business, I take it. I'm instructed to make inquiries as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Sutton-Cornish."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish sipped whiskey amiably and pointed at the decanter. He took his whiskey straight now. "Haven't the least idea," he said. "Why? Down at Chinverly, I suppose. Country place. She owns it."

"It so 'appens she ain't," Detective-sergeant Lloyd said, slipping on an "h," which he seldom did any more. "Been a separation, I'm told," he added grimly.

"That's *our* business, old man."

"Up to a point, yes, sir. Granted. Not after her solicitor can't find her and she ain't anywhere anybody can find her. Not *then* it ain't just your business."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish thought it over. "You might have something there—as the Americans say," he conceded.

The detective passed a large pale hand across his forehead and leaned forward.

"Let's 'ave it, sir," he said quietly. "Best in the long run. Best for all. Nothing to gain by foolishness. The law's the law."

"Have some whiskey," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said.

"Not tonight I won't," Detective-sergeant Lloyd said grimly.

"She left me." Mr. Sutton-Cornish shrugged. "And because of that the servants left me. You know what servants are nowadays. Beyond that I haven't an idea."

"Oh yus I think you 'ave," the detective said, losing a little more of his West End manner. "No charges have been preferred, but I think you know all right, all right."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish smiled airily. The detective scowled at him and went on:

"We've taken the liberty of watching you, and for a gentleman of your position—you've been living a damn queer life, if I may say so."

"You may say so, and then you may get to hell out of my house," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said suddenly.

"Not so farst. Not yet I won't."

"Perhaps you would like to search the house."

"Per'aps I should. Per'aps I shall. No hurry there. Takes time. Sometimes takes shovels." Detective-sergeant Lloyd permitted himself to leer rather nastily. "Seems to me like people does a bit of disappearin' when you 'appen to be around. Take that Skimp. Now take Mrs. Sutton-Cornish."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish stared at him with lingering malice. "And in your experience, sergeant, where do people go when they disappear?"

"Sometimes they don't disappear. Sometimes somebody disappears them." The detective licked his strong lips, with a slightly catlike expression.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish slowly raised his arm and pointed to the bronze door. "You wanted it, sergeant," he said suavely. "You shall have it. There is where you should look for Mr. Skimp, for Teddy the Pomeranian, and for my wife. There—behind that ancient door of bronze."

The detective didn't shift his gaze. For a long moment he didn't change expression. Then, quite amiably, he grinned. There was something else behind his eyes, but it was behind them.

"Let's you and me take a nice little walk," he said breezily. "The fresh air would do you a lot of good, sir. Let's—"

"There," Mr. Sutton-Cornish announced, still pointing with his arm rigid, "behind that door."

"Ah-ah," Detective-sergeant Lloyd waggled a large finger roguishly. "Been alone too much, you 'ave, sir. Thinkin' about things. Do it myself once in a while. Gets a fellow balmy in the crumpet like. Take a nice little walk with me, sir. We could stop somewhere for a nice—" The big, tawny man planted a forefinger on the end of his nose and pushed his head back and wiggled his little finger in the air at the same time. But his steady gray eyes remained in another mood.

"We'll look at my bronze door first."

Mr. Sutton-Cornish skipped out of his chair. The detective had him by the arm in a flash. "None of that," he said in a frosty voice. "Hold still, you."

"Key in here," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said, pointing at his breast pocket, but not trying to get his hand into it.

The detective got it out for him, stared at it heavily.

"All behind the door—on meathooks," Mr. Sutton-Cornish said. "All three. Little meathook for Teddy. Very large meathook for my wife. *Very* large meathook."

Holding him with his left hand, Detective-sergeant Lloyd thought it over. His pale brows were drawn tight. His large weathered face was grim—but skeptical.

"No harm to look," he said finally.

He marched Mr. Sutton-Cornish across the floor, pushed the bronze key into the huge antique lock, twisted the ring, and opened the door. He opened both sides of it. He stood looking into that very innocent alcove with its cabinet of knicknacks and absolutely nothing else. He became genial again.

"Meathooks, did you say, sir? Very cute, if I may say so."

He laughed, released Mr. Sutton-Cornish's arm and teetered on his heels.

"What the hell's it for?" he asked.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish doubled over very swiftly and launched his thin body with furious speed at the big detective.

"Take a little walk yourself—and find out!" he screamed.

Detective-sergeant Lloyd was a big and solid man and probably used to being butted. Mr. Sutton-Cornish could hardly have moved him six inches, even with a running start. But the bronze door had a high sill. The detective moved with the deceptive quickness of his trade, swayed his body just enough, and jarred his foot against the bronze sill.

If it hadn't been for that he would have plucked Mr. Sutton-Cornish neatly out of the air and held him squirming like a kitten, between his large thumb and forefinger. But the sill jarred him off balance. He stumbled a little, and swayed his body completely out of Mr. Sutton-Cornish's way.

Mr. Sutton-Cornish butted empty space—the empty space framed by that majestic door of bronze. He sprawled forward clutching—falling—clutching—across the sill—

Detective-sergeant Lloyd straightened up slowly, twisted his thick neck and stared. He moved back a little from the sill so that he could be perfectly certain the side of the door hid nothing from him. It didn't. He saw a cabinet of odd pieces of china, odds and ends of carved ivory and shiny black wood, and on top of the cabinet three little statuettes of pink marble.

He saw nothing else. There was nothing else in there to see.

"Gorblimey!" he said at last, violently. At least he thought he said it. Somebody said it. He wasn't quite sure. He was never absolutely sure about anything—after that night.

VII.

THE WHISKEY looked all right. It smelled all right, too. Shaking so that he could hardly hold the decanter Detective-sergeant Lloyd poured a little into a glass and took a sip in his dry mouth and waited.

After a little while he drank another spoonful. He waited again. Then he drank a stiff drink—a very stiff drink.

He sat down in the chair beside the whiskey and took his large folded cotton handkerchief out of his pocket and unfolded it slowly and mopped his face and neck and behind his ears.

In a little while he wasn't shaking quite so much. Warmth began to flow through him. He stood up, drank some more whiskey, then slowly and bitterly moved back down the room. He swung the bronze door shut, locked it, put the key down in his own pocket. He opened the partition door at the side, braced himself and stepped through into the alcove. He looked at the back of the bronze door. He touched it. It wasn't very light in there, but he could see that the place was empty, except for the silly-looking cabinet. He came out again shaking his head.

"Can't be," he said out loud. "Not a chance. Not 'arf a chance."

Then, with the sudden unreasonableness of the reasonable man, he flew into a rage.

"If I get 'ooked for this," he said between his teeth, "I get 'ooked."

HE HACKED the woodwork to ribbons. When he was done the bronze door stood alone on its base, jagged wood all around it, but not holding it any longer. Detective-sergeant Lloyd put the hand ax down, wiped his hands and face on his big handkerchief, and went in behind the door. He put his shoulder to it and set his strong, yellow teeth.

Only a brutally determined man of immense strength could have done it. The door fell forward with a heavy rumbling crash that seemed to shake the whole house. The echoes of that crash died away slowly, along infinite corridors of unbelief.

Then the house was silent again. The big man went out into the hall and had another look out of the front door.

He put his coats on, adjusted his hard hat, folded his damp handkerchief carefully and put it in his hip pocket, lit the cigar Mr. Sutton-Cornish had given him, took a drink of whiskey and swaggered to the door.

At the door he turned and deliberately sneered at the bronze door, lying fallen but still huge in the welter of splintered wood.

"To 'ell with you, 'ooever you are," Detective-sergeant Lloyd said. "I ain't no bloody primrose."

He shut the house door behind him. A little high fog outside, a few dim stars, a quiet street with lighted windows. Two or three cars of expensive appearance, very likely chauffeurs lounging in them, but no one in sight.

He crossed the street at an angle and walked along beside the tall iron railing of the park. Faintly through the rhododendron bushes he could see the dull glimmer of the little ornamental lake. He looked up and down the street and took the big bronze key out of his pocket.

"Make it a good 'un," he told himself softly.

His arm swept up and over. There was a minute splash in the ornamental lake, then silence. Detective-sergeant Lloyd walked on calmly, puffing at his cigar.

Back at the C. I. D. he gave his report steadily, and for the first and last time in his life, there was something besides truth in it. Couldn't raise anybody at the house. All dark. Waited three hours. Must all be away.

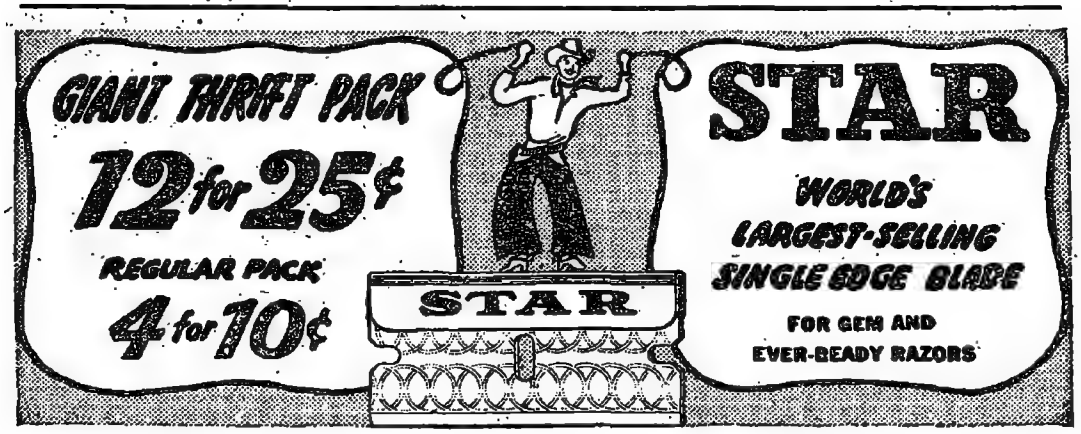
The inspector nodded and yawned.

The Sutton-Cornish heirs eventually pried the estate out of Chancery and opened up No. 14 Grinling Crescent and found the bronze door lying in a welter of dust and splintered wood and matted cobwebs. They stared at it goggle-eyed, and when they found out what it was, sent for dealers, thinking there might be a little money in it. But the dealers sighed and said no, no money in that sort of thing now. Better ship it off to a foundry and have it melted down for the metal. Get so much a pound. The dealers departed noiselessly with wry smiles.

Sometimes when things are a little dull in the Missing-Persons section of the C. I. D. they take the Sutton-Cornish file out and dust it off and look through it sourly and put it away again.

Sometimes when Inspector—formerly Detective-sergeant Thomas Lloyd is walking along an unusually dark and quiet street he will whirl suddenly, for no reason at all, and jump to one side with a swift anguished agility.

But there isn't really anybody there, trying to butt him.



THE MONOCLE

By H. W. GUERNSEY

THE MONOCLE

The emerald glass that showed each viewer the moment of his death! Except for one—the one who had, but could not use it!

by H. W. GUERNSEY

Illustrated by Wesso

LOGICALLY there was no one in the small room with her, simply because the door had not opened and closed. She was looking out the window, preoccupied, and at the moment thought nothing of the stir of air against the back of her neck. The subtle little breath of breeze was what might be caused by a human shape displacing its dimensions in atmosphere, close to her. Nor, contrary to the ABC's of telepathy, did she feel the speculative stare of the remarkable dark-green eyes.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and warm, and August. The afternoon was a quiet, nunnish gray, and through the casement window she watched the light rain fall in successive sheets of veiling. The south lawn sloped away more and more steeply toward the river, and the isolated big trees looked bigger as they smoked with fugitive mist. The deepening of the downward-feathering gray curtained the south bank of Willow River altogether. On the flats over there, the city of Thurston's airport, Monroe Field, was as good as locked behind the barrier of a mountain. In the private cubicle assigned to her in the Sherwood University Library, Constance Ydes, twenty-three, stopped indulging in the vague nostalgia which the rain produced and returned to the open book.

She had a cork-topped desk and a straight mahogany chair in a cubicle whose length, width, and height were about the same as those of a cell in a modern prison. The floor was cork. Besides the open book, there were more than twenty books piled up on the desk neatly in the shape of a fortification. She was using typewriter paper for scribbling, and had a sheaf of notes. Though she didn't need to, and she was bored, she was brushing up on her Latin.

She was brainy, and could read Latin with facility and familiarity as though it were a memorized quatrain from the "Rubaiyat." But the examiners at Sherwood U were notoriously tough; since she was majoring in languages, they would give her an ancient Icelandic idiom, possibly, a rune derived from the Spanish somehow, and require her to trace it back to hell-and-gone through Europe to its roots somewhere in the Mediterranean. She had passed the written examination handsomely, and she was going to pass the oral in the same fashion. She knew more than any other one member of the Sherwood faculty. By the end of the year she would be Dr. Ydes. Beyond the least peradventure of a doubt she was a very brainy girl.

The open book was one of an armful which she had collected in The Pit, a room in the bindery where library gifts and purchases were received. Three girls classified the volumes from pulp junk to collectors' items, down there. Connie had prowled, and taken this one among others and borne the lot up through the stacks to her cubicle.

The book was a slim volume bound in vellum. All the corners of the covers were worn and had an eggshell curl

besides, and the parchment signatures were buckled, crackling with every turn of a page. The work was in early Latin and probably was valuable; it had to do with transactions concerning corn and animals and farm products in farmlands outlying the district of Cebes, wherever that was. Connie knew her geography but had never heard of the place.

The thin volume was generously ornamented with rubrics, initial letters elaborately and sometimes fantastically inscribed in red. In reading through the book she had noted subconsciously that the rubrics taken in order formed words. Going through the book rapidly, she wrote them down, and when she reached the end she had a sentence which puzzled her. It was Latin, but untranslatable. The construction was one which she hadn't encountered before, nor was she familiar with a single word. She had spoken it aloud for the sound of it, and did so again now.

"I heard you the first time," said the man standing immobile behind her.

She turned her head in annoyance at having her privacy invaded; then her eyes grew round and shocked, and she rose to her feet galvanically with a quick inhalation. She opened her mouth to scream, and he ordered, "Don't scream," in a particularly calm voice.

Three quick steps, and she was pounding him on the chest with her clenched fists. "Get out of here!" she said furiously. "Get out! Get out!"

He grabbed her wrists, gave her a gentle shove and said very slowly and imperturbably: "Don't get excited, please. Keep your head on."

She backed away from him until the window ledge touched her; he watched her with curiosity, looking her over and observing her compressed lips and frightened breathing. The fact that he was stark naked didn't bother him at all, and the manner in which she was garbed obviously intrigued him.

Barefoot, his height was six feet two. His feet were well shaped, looking as though he had never worn shoes. His posture was negligent in the graceful way he stood erect, and he was nonchalantly tossing a circular piece of green glass which landed with a little slap like a half dollar striking flatwise every time he caught it in his palm.

"Well?" he asked. "You're not afraid any more now, are you? What were you afraid of in the first place?"

"I don't know." She corrected herself and asked: "Don't you think it's very unusual for you to be walking around all bare? Where are your clothes?"

"My clothes," he said reminiscently. "When I drowned, I wasn't wearing any. So you see—"

"When you drowned?" she asked incredulously. "Don't talk like a fool!"

"I drowned," he declared flatly, "swimming at night with a friend in the sacred lake behind the temple of Uranus, in Cebes."

She looked at her book, back to him and asked: "Oh, have you read that book?"

He glanced at it. "I wrote that book," he said casually. "Originally it was in Ceban, of course. What you have there is a somewhat bungled translation in Latin, from the Greek."

"Really?" she asked, giving him enough rope to hang himself. She decided that she wasn't afraid of him, and could always scream if developments required her doing so. At the moment, her visitor was standing too close to the door for her to make a run for it, but he was keeping his distance and absently juggling the piece of green glass. She heard herself asking, in a self-possessed voice: "What's your name?"

"Ardanth."

"The name of the author of that book is Publius Nato."

"Nato was a notorious liar."

"Is Ardanth your last name?"

"My last name?" He looked puzzled. "I didn't have any name before that; it's the only name I ever had."

Recovering from her shock at first, she felt more and more secure, and sarcastic. She said: "Well, let's get down to brass tacks. Is this a practical joke or something? Or just what do you think you are?"

"I," said Ardanth humbly, in contrast with the good-humored arrogance of his bearing, "am a sorcerer."

"Oh, you're a sorcerer," said Connie, unsurprised.

"Yes. My father was something of a sorcerer himself, but if I say so myself I would have been able to outsmart him four ways from the Jack if I'd lived longer. He was a religious old toper, and he told me that if I kept on swimming in the sacred lake, I was going to die young. For once the old codger was right." He told her about Cebes and its people and customs, including details not in the book, details which did not sound invented and were not. Ardanth made simple statements of fact, and she could take them or leave them, and all the while his sardonic green eyes were laughing at her.

His eyes were the color of deep emerald resulting from the addition of a trace of brown. He was remarkably handsome in build with his broad shoulders, deep chest, lean and muscular hips. He had height, and he wasn't any hairy ape. The most remarkable thing about him was the color of his skin. It was red, not like sunburn; it was a ruddy bronze, and she commented on it, asking him whether it was his natural color. It was, and typical of his race. Also, she received the impression he intended—that he was not particularly handsome according to Cebean standards; the men and women of Cebes were all fashioned like angels without wings. They worshiped beauty, and when they started growing old they killed themselves.

Ardanth didn't want to die particularly, because living was so much fun, so, being an accomplished sorcerer, he took the precaution at an early age, during his apprenticeship, of devising means of perpetuating himself. One of these means was through the book which Publius Nato claimed to have written.

"How could you know that the book wouldn't be lost?" Connie asked skeptically.

"Part of the sorcery was in knowing that the book would not be lost," Ardanth said condescendingly.

He explained that the book would fall into someone's hands eventually, that the rubrics would be joined into words, then the sentence, when uttered, would be the incantation which he had planted for the purpose of materializing himself. There was no possibility of any slip-up. If there did happen to be a slip-up somewhere along the line, he pointed out, there wouldn't have been any sorcery in his labors whatsoever. And the evidence of his ability could not be denied. He was in the cubicle with her, and he hadn't used the door to get inside.

Nor had he put all his eggs in one basket. The work in Latin was one guarantee of his popping back into existence, no matter whether it took only ten days, two hundred years, or millenniums. It was a long jump from Cebes to the city of Thurston, and he admitted that the technical method wasn't perfect; but, no matter how erratically it might work, it worked. Another device he employed, which would work sometime in the future, was a musical composition which an archæologist was going to find; when the music was played through, there suddenly would be Ardanth. He also buried

sealed bottles containing batches of a brew he invented. It was immaterial whether a bottle broke in an earthquake or was opened by scientists in the year 10,000. Ardanth of Cebes had fixed things so that he would crop up in repeated lifetimes; he was a young man who was going to go a long way.

His age was twenty-four. When he reached that age he decided that it was old enough, and performed the required acts of sorcery which guaranteed that he would never grow an hour older physically. He had been twenty-four for several years, and the natives of Cebes were beginning to look on him with suspicion, when he drowned that night in the lake.

"Sorcerer or no sorcerer," said Connie, "you can't go around the way you are. You can't stay here. You've got to get some clothes on."

Ardanth looked shocked, antagonistic. "Do you mean to say I've got to wear things like what you have on?"

"Oh, heavens, no! Men wear much different clothes."

"They do?" He was even more incredulous; then he said resignedly: "All right. Do you mind going out and getting an outfit for me?"

She hesitated. "Clothes cost money, and I haven't got enough."

Ardanth shrugged. "I'll take care of that."

He stepped the distance to her desk, opened his left hand and spilled out a pile of gold pieces, and in a very gentlemanly fashion backed away.

Connie eyed him warily, then advanced to examine the pile of two or three dozen coins. They were the size of U. S. fives which used to be in circulation, but were crude, stamped pieces with rough edges, not even circular. They were mere nuggets of twenty-four-carat gold smacked out flat with a hammer between the jaws of dies. The inscriptions on the hunky coins were in lettering which Connie couldn't read. The language was Ceban, and the head on the coin was bearded and bewildered, representing Adam, the Ceban kingdom's legendary first king.

"Adam," she reflected. "Is it the same Adam?"

"The same Adam as what?" Ardanth inquired. "I'm a lineal descendant of his, if that's what you mean."

"Let it go," Connie said. She flicked the pile of coins and scattered a few with her fingers. "This money might have been legal tender in Cebes, but it's no good now. It's not even coinage; it's buttons. It's not even worth anything numismatically, because there isn't any Ceban coinage on record. All I can do is turn it in as old gold at a discount, and that involves a lot of red tape besides. They might ask me where I got all that gold, and I'd have to tell them I found it in my grandfather's trunk or something."

Ardanth's stare was idiotic with surprise. "Do you mean to tell me that gold is no good in this country?"

"It doesn't make sense to me, either," Connie admitted, "but that's the way it is in the United States of America. If you get caught with a few pounds of gold pieces of the realm in your possession, you have to do a lot of explaining."

"Then what do you use?"

"Paper, engraved." She showed him a dollar bill.

"Hm-m-m," Ardanth commented contemptuously. He collected his Ceban cold, stared awhile at the bank note, then slapped his hand down and left a pile of greenbacks on the desk. He asked: "How's this?"

Connie picked up the wad and sidled around Ardanth, backing to the door. She said: "All right, I guess. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She got out and closed the door hurriedly, before anyone browsing in the stacks of the library could see into her

cubicle. She ran to the stairs at the head of the stack, near the archway connecting with the main circulation room, with her high heels striking the marble flooring like someone tapping tacks home rapidly into wood with a mallet.

For a moment she stood at the head of the stairs, wondering whether she would be fool enough to return to her cubicle, where Ardanth, the sorcerer, was waiting in all his handsome nakedness. She opened her purse, and in it was the wad of bank notes, more than she had ever seen at one time before. If this was a practical joke contrived by fraternity men, it was a damned expensive joke. Breathing rapidly again, she snapped the purse shut and descended the stairs to the landing which led to the side entrance and the misty gray outdoors.

She proceeded directly to the campus haberdashery, Milikin's, a high-priced establishment in which she had never been before. A campus big shot, the president of the Student Council, was having himself measured for a garment. He had his arms extended on both sides like turkey wings, and the spindly little tailor was crouching in front deferentially, jabbing the big customer with the end of a tape measure in order to decide on the length of a trousers leg. The large customer was a football player; he made touchdowns; he stared at Connie, because girls never entered Millikin's, and because he had never seen her before, and she was something of a feast to the eye.

Beginning with jockey shorts, she ordered a complete outfit for Ardanth —Dan for short. She knew what sizes of things men wore, more or less, and with Dan's image in mind she ordered socks, gabardine slacks, a gabardine sport shirt, a jacket with patch pockets, and tan oxfords at twenty bucks whose leather was as soft as a baby's cheek. The woolen sport socks didn't need any garters. She bought a belt of ostrich leather, a neckerchief-size linen handkerchief for his pants pocket and another for his jacket. There was plenty of money left, so she bought a wrist watch, a penknife, a wallet, and a clouty-looking stick, a fountain pen and pencil.

"Put everything in one box," said Connie, "and tie a string around it."

"Maybe," the clerk hazarded, "the gentleman had better come in and have the trousers fitted."

"Maybe," said Connie with a dead pan, "I'm going to wear the garments myself. How do you know?"

"I see," said the clerk ambiguously.

Connie put the remainder of the money in the wallet, the wallet into the box, and the box under her arm. She walked back across the campus to the library and used the rear entrance to the stacks, went up to her cubicle and entered. She sighed, let her shoulders sag and leaned back against the door for a moment. The room was empty. Ardanth had gotten tired of waiting, or else it had only been some kind of unique practical joke, after all. At any rate, Dan was gone.

She shrugged, moved slowly over to the desk and dropped her package on it. Looking out the window at the foggy river, she puzzled over what his purpose had been. If it was some kind of fraternity prank, she didn't understand why she had been picked on. She felt a little bit crazy in a daydreaming sort of way. But throughout the episode she had maintained her poise, except for the initial jolt of Dan's arrival. She hadn't screamed or acted foolish to any extent, and there was the inexplicable fact that the prank was fairly costly.

Behind her the door opened abruptly. She turned, and Dan ducked in furtively; he put his eye to an inch of crack and stared out into the stacks for a moment, then closed the door sound-

lessly. He was still as ruddily bare as an Easter egg, and he carried a large flat tome under his arm. An atlas.

"Wh-h-h-h!" he said, whispering a sigh. "Was that ever a close call! Someone came up the stairs and nearly cut me off from the alley running this way."

"You're a fool to take chances like that," she said critically. "You could get thrown into jail, or anything."

"Well, I guess I can get out of jails," he said. "I was only thinking of how embarrassing it might have been for you. No harm done, anyhow."

He opened the book on the desk, explaining that he had gotten curious about his home town. He had a hard time locating the atlases and would have waited for her, he said, but he had no idea how far she had to go and how long it would take to do her shopping. He riffled through the pages of maps and opened the atlas at Africa. He prowled around Egypt with his forefinger, and located an unmarked point in the Libyan Desert. Disbelief showed in his face.

"There isn't anything there," said Connie, "but sand. It's all desert."

Dan muttered unintelligible words, then commented, "I wonder what happened to my people."

"If their skin coloring was like yours, there aren't any, any more, or at least I never heard of any. Very likely they were absorbed by the blacks."

"And what a beautiful place Cebes was!" he mourned. "Well, there's no point in visiting it if it's gone."

"When did you leave it?"

"Rocks were falling in the water of the lake all around me that night," he remembered. "A hail of hot stones from the sky, and I wasn't able to dodge one of them. The tail of a comet, possibly, and it must have wiped the city out. That was a long while ago, evidently."

"After the pyramids?"

"What pyramids?"

"The Egyptians built some pyramids. Stone monuments."

"No," he said absently, moving his finger. "There were cities here, and here, and there was a lake that would surely show on a map of this scale. They're all gone." He shrugged, let his shoulders drop and closed the atlas with a slam.

Connie had untied the box. She said: "You've got brains enough to figure out how to put these clothes on without my showing you. I'll wait outside; rap when you're ready."

When she re-entered after his rap she stared at him for a long time from head to foot; her having a hand in getting him up in his resplendency gave her at least a half of one percent ownership. She took a long slow breath with a slow smile.

"I know how ridiculous I look," he said curtly. "You needn't laugh. But I didn't think you'd play a trick on me."

"I didn't play any trick on you," she protested. "You look all right, Dan. Turn around."

He turned around, looking over his shoulder at her suspiciously. He said: "I never felt sillier nor more uncomfortable in my life. If men wear clothes like these and like them, there is something wrong with their minds. Or else they haven't any more fight in them than rabbits, and women are responsible. However, when in Cebes, do as Cebans do."

"There isn't anything wrong with the way you look. Really there isn't."

"And this thing." He picked up the watch, and listened to it tick, curious. "Is there an insect inside? It is trying hard to get out."

She explained what the watch was for, and the pen and pencil, and showed him how to open the knife. With the articles distributed in his pockets, she took one of the handkerchiefs and

tucked it expertly into the breast pocket of his jacket with the four corners of crisp white linen showing. He rested on the cane negligently with the lazy convincingness of a man who has always carried a stick, and scrutinized her expectantly. The steady regard of his green eyes made her nervous, and then she became a little frightened.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"To coin an understatement," he said thoughtfully, "you've done me a good turn, regardless of whether you acted knowingly. I'm under an obligation to you." He juggled the piece of circular green glass in his right hand, making it spin and glitter with winks of hard, bright light.

"Oh, no," she refused quickly. "I would have done the same for anyone. You don't owe me anything."

"You'll have to be repaid whether you like it or not," said Ardanth. "You're a bright girl and you know what you want. You plan things ahead, far ahead. If it's something material that you want, tell me what it is, and it's yours. You certainly have ambitions. Tell me what's more important to you than anything else, and I'll take care of it immediately."

Connie swallowed, shook her head. She suggested: "Take me to dinner sometime."

Dan looked annoyed and refused, saying: "Out of proportion entirely. Don't hesitate because you think something is impossible. Out with it, Connie."

His voice was slow, liquid with the Ceban accent; he could probably sing; his use of her nickname gave her heart a twinge. She still refused, smiling and shaking her head.

"Because I'm going," Dan said. "I have places to go, and a lot of things to do, and you're delaying me."

"Then go," she said, looking aside through the window at the wet campus.

"Stubborn little fool," Ardanth commented unemotionally. "Here."

She turned her head to look at him, looked down at his extended arm. She put her hand out, and he dropped the green glass into her palm. She asked: "What is it?"

"A piece of emerald," he said. "A lens; a monocle, I think you call it."

"Emerald?" she asked.

"Emerald; I said it was emerald." His voice didn't sharpen, but his impatience made her confused. "Something I picked up along the way; it's yours."

It was of monocle size; if it was stone it was flawless, and it was flawlessly ground. The edges were beveled, and caught light with the splintered glitter of precious stone. In color it was true smaragdine of a lighter shade than Ardanth's eyes. The glass was thick, not even shallow at the rim, and fattening at the center to an axis considerably greater than that of the run of solitaires on display in a jeweler's window. The stone from which the lens had been cut must have been a stone of royal dimensions, and she said as much.

"It was," Dan said succinctly. "I pried it out of the royal scepter in the palace treasure room one night myself."

"What's it for?"

"To look through."

"But why emerald?"

"Because," said Dan, with exaggerated politeness, "it happened to be best suited for the purpose."

"I'm sorry I'm so stupid," Connie said defensively, but I don't understand. My eyes are all right; I don't need a monocle." At the moderately baleful look he gave her she said hastily: "I'm awfully sorry. Thank you very much. I'll keep it as a memento."

"The monocle has a particular and peculiar property," he said, "which is its raison d'être. It is not like any other monocle. It has the property of revealing to the person who wears it the manner in which he is going to die.

The circumstances surrounding his final moments alive."

"Then you must have known that you were going to drown," she pointed out.

"Naturally," he agreed. "And incredible as the event seemed to me, because I was the best swimmer in Cebes, the details of those last few minutes didn't vary in the most trifling particular from what I had observed through the monocle long before. I was inclined to discredit the evidence of my own eyes, but fortunately took the precautions which were responsible for my being here now."

"You'd better keep it," she said, offering it back.

Ignoring her hand, he said: "I also looked through it while you were stringing the rubrics together and wondering what the words meant. So I know what is going to happen to me this time."

"What's going to happen?"

"I am going to die in a way more horrible than I like to contemplate," he said. "You're better off not knowing. There's no way of knowing just when it's going to happen, either, and that's why I'm in such a hurry. I've got a lot of ground to cover. Will you excuse me?"

He started for the door.

"Wait a minute!" she called. "I want to know what's going to happen. I've got a right to. And, anyhow, if you know what's going to happen, can't you do anything about it? You can stay away from it, can't you?"

"You can't do a thing about it," he said with finality. "If it's going to happen, it's going to happen." He opened the door and started out.

"But I don't want this!" she cried. 'It's yours!"

"I don't want it, either," he retorted. "This time is bad enough. I'm going to die in a much nastier way than last time, and next time I'd rather not know anything about it and just let it take place. Good-by."

"Ardanth! Wait! Don't go yet!"

"You don't need me now. If you get into any kind of trouble, all you have to do is call me."

"Please!" she entreated, and in answer she heard his footsteps descending the marble stairs rapidly, as though he hadn't a second to waste. She ran after him and called down, "Is your name really Ardanth?"

"My name is really Ardanth," came the voice from below.

"How can I get in touch with you?"

There was no reply, only silence punctuated finally by the thud of the steel door to the yard swinging shut. A girl entered the stacks from the circulation room and stared curiously; Connie straightened and returned to her cubicle. Now he was gone. If she got into any kind of trouble she could call him, but beyond that she concerned him nothing. She interested him not at all, except through her agency in materializing him out of the unknown. She had a high regard for herself, and thinking about his attitude and manners made her scowl. She sat down at her desk. She never had seen, never would see, a more handsome animal in her life than the vanished sorcerer of Cebes.

After a long while in thought she remembered the monocle clenched in her moist palm; she opened her fingers and inspected it, polished it with a handkerchief which she took from her handbag. She held it against the print of an open book, and it magnified the letters enormously. The green hue of the stone didn't interfere with its transparency; the magnifying power was high. It was cool to the touch, cooler than what she thought the temperature of the room was.

She brought the monocle to her eye gingerly. She blinked, closed her left eye. Nothing. The field was black and

she saw nothing, in spite of the fact that print showed plainly through the lens when it was laid on the page of an open book. She put the thick concave-convex miracle of emerald in her purse, and for a while just sat.

Constance Ydes was a very fastidious girl. She was skeptical of the motives of men, and had learned in her twenty-odd years to abhor the time-wasting of the common, or garden, variety of fun in the precincts of Sherwood U. She didn't think drinking beer in Stiffy's with a man across the table was pleasurable. For an hour or so dancing was all right, except that a man insisted on murmuring idiocies while he hitched around to the music with his feet. She had come to the conclusion that most men didn't bathe more than twice a week, or that they liked the smell of themselves, or exerted themselves too much during the day, or used a secret brand of obnoxious scent.

She was a desirable girl and had a rounded shapeliness. Her bearing as she walked was an advertisement for physical culture. Besides which, she had an eye for choosing flattering, right clothes from the crazy mêlée of the fashion dictators' current bellyache in hats, dresses, shoes, and accessories. She was independent; her name was listed in various handwritings in many notebooks as "100%, but nix," "Ydes; nope," and so on. She had a successively knocked-down opinion of men and hadn't considered their importance very much because she was brighter than any of those whom she had run into. Callow, rough material, all of them. Boys.

Rising abruptly, she returned the books on her desk to the stacks in three armloads, and sallied forth. She crossed the campus and hied herself down University Avenue to the Green Lantern, which was what Stiffy called his place. There she had four daiquiris all by her lonely. There was a telephone booth and a directory, search through which yielded no information. There wasn't any Mr. Ardanth. She transliterated the name, spelled it backward, but it wouldn't work. She dialed information, and was informed that no Ardanth was listed under a new or private number, either. How was she going to call him, then, if she wanted him? She paid for her drinks and quit the bar in disgust.

Studying any more today was out of the question. She lighted a cigarette and betook herself down University Avenue into the city of Thurston. On impulse, as she was passing a jewelry shop where diamonds and old gold were purchased, she decided to have the monocle looked at.

Behind the counter in the long, narrow shop was a gnome of a man with sorrowful round poodle eyes separated by a long caricature of nose. He was bald, and his cheeks would look black and unscrubbed no matter how often he shaved. Mr. Paulson. The proprietor was being conversed with by a young man in jaunty snap-brim hat, lushly knotted necktie, and a pup tent of camel's-hair coat. Dick Hermann. When Connie entered he uncrossed his legs, took his elbow off the counter and retreated politely to give her room and the once over.

"How do you do?" said Connie.

"How do you do?" said the colorless leathery lips under the nose in a surprisingly sweet voice.

"I'd like to know if this is worth anything." She produced the monocle and laid it on the little red velvet prayer rug atop the counter.

"You want to sell it?" he asked disinterestedly, ready with a shake of the head.

"Has it any value?" she countered.

The glance of his bright, round brown eyes descended, more interested in her figure than the green object. The

monocle was a circle of cold-green fire on the velvet. His gaze reached it, and for a moment he was carven in immobility. Clocks, and repaired watches hanging on a board, were all ticking together in a somehow sinister, frustrated hurry. Paulson's delicate, womanish hand, the fingernails grimy, picked up the monocle with leisurely reverence. His calm, muscular, shiny fingers turned the lens, and his narrow chest slowly inflated. He put the lens to his eye, and he stared ahead with a kind of bughouse intentness. His features stiffened into an expression of astonished horror. He expelled a weird snort through his nose; the monocle escaped from his fingers and landed on the velvet, and was recaptured skillfully on the first bounce.

"Sorry," he mumbled apologetically. He chuckled with a kind of horrible beguilement and said: "As the horse who died said, I never did that before. No harm done though."

"I asked you whether it has any value," she prompted, aware that young Hermann was inspecting the fashioning of her legs as though she were merchandise for sale.

Paulson cleared his throat and hazarded: "Sure, I guess it might be worth something. It's a nice job of grinding; no nicks on it or anything. Where'd you get it? If you don't mind me asking."

"In my grandfather's trunk. What is it worth?"

Paulson went into a trance; suddenly he smiled as though afflicted with generosity this afternoon, and in his mellow little voice offered: "Give you a dollar."

"A dollar!" she exclaimed with sarcasm.

Patronizingly he inquired: "What did you think you could get for it? It's only a magnifying glass, a reading glass, and it's green. You can see how green it is. But I tell you, just because I got a use for a glass like this personally, I'll give you two dollars."

"On second thought, I don't want to sell it." She took possession of the object from his reluctant fingers.

"Tell you what I'm going to offer you," he urged. "On account of that's such a fine piece of glass even if it is green, I'm going to give you ten dollars. That's a lot."

"No, thank you."

"I'm giving you twenty. That's the limit."

"Good afternoon."

"Wait!" His voice lost some of its charm, and his bright eyes looked dangerous. "You can't offer an object for sale and then change your mind, miss. That's the law, and I got to use it." He shook his head regretfully. "I offer you a fair price and you don't take it, then I have to charge you a fee for appraising. The fee is ten dollars."

"Do you mean to tell me that I have to pay you ten dollars if I don't sell you the monocle?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry I got to do it, that's all. I give you twenty or you give me ten, that's the way it is. Otherwise I got to hold you and call a policeman. You make up your mind now, or I can't let you leave the shop."

Connie came back to the counter, nearly squirming with revulsion, and blazed at him: "You contemptible little monkey, do you know what I could do to you for threatening me if I wanted to go to the trouble? Just try to prevent me from leaving this dirty little crooked place." A swift, sharp slap of her hand made him blink his eyes and back up against his shelves. She departed unmolested, walking stiff-legged.

Hermann came up along the counter grinning, and asked: "What was that all about, pop?"

Paulson groaned, chanting: "My God, my God! Oh-h-h! She had an

emerald and she don't know it, maybe. And the color; suffering snakes!"

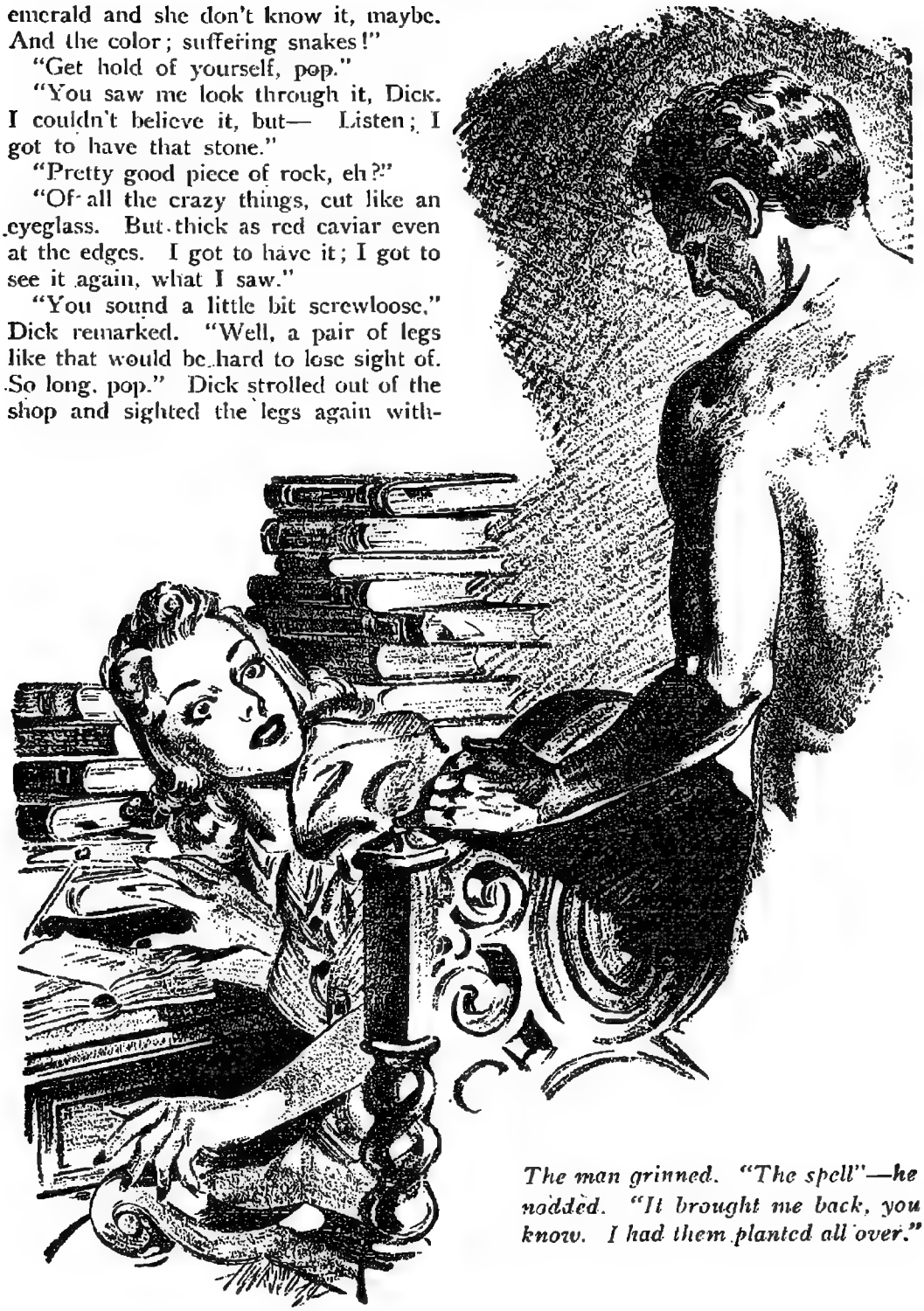
"Get hold of yourself, pop."

"You saw me look through it, Dick. I couldn't believe it, but— Listen; I got to have that stone."

"Pretty good piece of rock, eh?"

"Of all the crazy things, cut like an eyeglass. But thick as red caviar even at the edges. I got to have it; I got to see it again, what I saw."

"You sound a little bit screwloose," Dick remarked. "Well, a pair of legs like that would be hard to lose sight of. So long, pop." Dick strolled out of the shop and sighted the legs again with-



The man grinned. "The spell"—he nodded. "It brought me back, you know. I had them planted all over."

out any delay. He kept them in range, window shopping and otherwise loitering along.

CONNIE felt a little sick from her encounter with the jeweler, and for a moment considered speaking to the cop on the corner. But she had the average person's wariness of the police, and also the resilience to recover quickly from her indignation. Besides, she had come out ahead on the deal; there was no trace of doubt now about the monocle being emerald.

Certainly there were some things which couldn't be foreseen. Like that. Like Ardanth's materializing in her cubicle at the library in the first place. Up to now, everything in her life had been planned well in advance. She was alone, and eminently personable, but had made no major mistakes which would have been so easy for a girl like herself. She had a little money from a trust fund; she had brains; when she wanted to talk intelligently with someone she would have dinner with one of the faculty, or someone who had been closely associated with her father.

At the U she graduated with highest honors, because she had studied indefatigably, because she intended to teach and perhaps do a little writing whenever she got around to finding out whether she had a style. There was no question about her getting her doctorate. There was a job waiting for her in the Thurston schools, teaching English, but she wanted the language post at Sherwood, and she knew she was going to get it eventually if not even in the near future. Eventually, too, she was going to get married, because she believed in the institution, to someone older than herself, to the proper person when he came along. That would take care of itself in time, though she would take steps to make sure that it happened before she was thirty.

She knew exactly what lay ahead—the mountain of books she would read yet, the hats and dresses and shoes she would buy, classroom routine, faculty teas, strolling on the river road in the evening, symphonies at the memorial auditorium on the knoll, quiet dinners excellently prepared, the regular sabbatical which would mean travel. She didn't know when she would have time for children, the arrival of which would, of course, depend upon the man.

Her purse was under her right arm, and she hugged it to her side, thinking about the monocle. If one could see his future through it, it would be an advantage, of course. But that was a fantasy; she had looked through it, and it was as blank as holding a poker chip to her eye. On the other hand, Papa Paulson had dropped the monocle convulsively; his face had gone flabby and his eyes had bugged with a look that couldn't have startled her more than if he had howled.

Annoyance made her walk rapidly, and she kept up the pace through Thurston's shopping area until she ran into a girl whom she knew. The friend was a Sherwood postgraduate and was already teaching, now on her summer vacation.

They had cocktails together while Connie pumped her about the circumstances, salary, good and bad of her job, and had dinner in the same restaurant. At a table near them was a young fellow having a sandwich and beer. Connie thought she had seen him before, but since he showed no sign of recognizing her, dismissed him as a Sherwood undergraduate.

She walked home, since the business district was sharply defined by Cathedral Hill on the west and the distance to her house wasn't far.

There was a little fog but no rain, and there was no wind in the twilight. At the downtown mouth of the trolley tunnel began the terraced crawl of granite steps leading to the top of the

hill. After fifty or sixty steps she became aware of masculine feet ascending unhurriedly behind her. Her curiosity wasn't aroused. She was independent, more or less; she could take care of herself; she wasn't the kind of girl to look behind even casually. Anyhow, the big globes of the lamp-posts were abloom with milky light.

Her address was two blocks beyond the cathedral. It was a squat and square stone mansion, shabby between its neighbors, whose wealthy owner had left it to his faithful housekeeper, Mrs. Geraldine Horrigan. In the yellow stone fortress lived Mrs. Horrigan, Connie, and two bony, aristocratic old gentlemen who snored all day and were gone all night on their mysterious labors, with the consequence that she never saw them except coming and going, exhausted or only half awake.

The bell did not ring, because Mrs. Horrigan was nearly as deaf as the golden-oak newel at the bottom of the broad staircase curving majestically to the upper hall. Mrs. Horrigan spent all her days reading newspapers in the kitchen, and a thumb pressed to the button of the doorbell only turned on an electric light over the refrigerator. Sometimes this didn't work either, since the old lady's vision was deteriorating, so she wasn't bothered very much by panhandlers, salesmen, or prospective boarders. She thought Connie was somewhat more attractive than she wanted any girl in the house to be, but gave her a key to the front door before the end of the month.

Connie used her key, found that it was unnecessary because the door was unlocked. She called hello to Mrs. Horrigan in the lighted kitchen and received no answer, as usual, and ascended the leisurely sweep of the stairs to her room.

She washed off her make-up in the bathroom; her lips looked pale, so she applied some of the ripely colored lipstick she used, grimaced at herself in the mirror and washed it off again. She stripped, then showered, soaping herself briskly all over, rinsed with care as though she were covered with dye, and dried herself with the unhurried sleepy raptness of a cat.

Her bed was a four-poster. She stuck her arms and head through the soft lace and ripples of a crêpe gown, and indulged in her regular backward leap onto the bed. For a while she lay looking at the yellowing wallpaper of the ceiling. One of the two wide windows creaked and came down shut with a whispering bump as the house settled. She stuck her legs in the air, came erect and sat on the edge of the bed. She dipped her feet into her slippers and went to the window, raising it wide with a jam so that it couldn't fall again, and walked back to her dresser.

Her purse lay on the dresser; she opened it and took the monocle out, stared at it, fingered it like a coin and polished it with a handkerchief. She was a great hand at resisting temptation and didn't look through it, beyond seeing the embroidered figures of the dresser scarf. She pulled the top drawer open and slipped the slab of emerald into a slip which she folded up in the middle of the pile. She returned to bed, lay tense in thought for a long while after she turned the light off. Every time she stirred she relaxed a little more, until complete muscular repose invited her into the pool of sleep.

A METALLIC click awakened her. She blinked drowsily, looking toward the windows over the plump curve of the pillow; then her eyes stayed open and awake, and what oppressed her in a smothering embrace was fear. The room was entirely dark and silent, completely dark except for two accents of light. One was the keyhole; the other was the dial of her radio on the shelf. While she stared at the radio, which

she had not turned on, she was sure, the illuminated dial was blotted out. It reappeared as the prowler passed in front. The click she had heard was that of the radio being turned on.

There was a hum as the tubes warmed, and dance music from Frisco gushed from silence suddenly into a flood of rhythmic sound in the room. Connie turned her head with a jerk when the yellow eye of light at the keyhole went blank. The wall switch was snapped, and the chandelier overhead jumped the room into light. At the door stood a young man in a polo coat. She had seen him before, at Paulson's and at the restaurant where she had had dinner. Hermann. He had a handkerchief across his nose as a mask, and his eyes gleamed under the brim of his hat.

"I wouldn't make any noise," he said calmly.

She wouldn't. A glance at the alarm clock showed her that it was past midnight. Mrs. Horrigan would be sound asleep, and a bomb wouldn't awaken her. On the dresser her purse was opened and the contents dumped out. The drawers had been rummaged through. Connie said with calm that surprised herself: "There isn't anything here worth stealing. Take what you can find and go away."

"I couldn't find it," he explained over the swing and volume of the radio. "Where's the emerald?"

"What emerald?"

Hermann advanced step by step toward the bed and observed: "I'm going to like this. Nobody's going to hear you over that radio, and they'll think it's part of the broadcast even if they do."

He reached for her, and Connie jumped out on the other side of the big four-poster with a convulsive effort. He circled the foot of the bed deliberately, and she threw herself on the bed and bounced off on the side toward the door. Hermann really got his legs working this time and shagged her, cutting off escape to the hall. She fled to the open windows and he snagged onto her before she made them.

Struggling, she attempted to claw him, but only tore the mask loose. Twisting and wrenching, however, she did break free from his embrace, whereupon Hermann walloped her one across the head with the flat of his hand. Trembling, she waited for him to hit her again. He marched upon her to do just that thing if she didn't talk. She had never called for help in her life and wasn't sure of the procedure, so her cry was the merest wail, without any volume, as though she were whimpering to herself.

"Ardanth!" she cried, simply because all this was his fault, and there wasn't anyone else within conceivable earshot.

A cyclone entered the room. In the violent air, paper on the desk went flying; her flying hair stung her cheeks, and Hermann staggered as the square yardage of his coat got caught in a buffet of the wind. The door to the hall opened, closed with a thundering slam. Hermann jumped like a cat in a bathtub, and Connie opened her eyes just in time to see Ardanth reach the prowler with a spring of headlong ferocity. Seizing him by the necktie, he batted Hermann's head back and forth while he warmed up.

"Oh, you want to make something of it, do you?" Hermann asked in an ugly manner, and he clawed murderously for the faithful rodney which he wore in a shoulder sling on occasions such as this. He just got the butt of the revolver into view when the man took a home-run swing at his jaw with a baseball bat. Hermann's feet left the floor and, as gravity almost ceased to operate, he floated down to the rug in a horizontal position as gently as thistledown.

"I think you broke his jaw," said Connie.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Ardanth. "That's what I was trying to do. Why didn't you call sooner?"

"It never entered my head that you'd be in the neighborhood and would hear me," she said.

"I'd hear you if I was a hundred miles away or a hundred years," he said. "I told you that. Remember." He picked up the sodden form of Hermann and started for the door with him.

"What are you going to do with him?" Connie asked anxiously.

"I'll think of something."

"I wish you wouldn't go to the police."

"I don't intend to. Some method of persuading him not to come back will occur to me."

"Will you come back?"

"Well, for a little while. I was busy on something when you called."

It wasn't long before he returned; in fact, she was pacing the floor and only finishing her second cigarette when he opened the door. She had shut off the radio. The fact that she was wearing only the diaphanous robe didn't occur to her, nor interest him particularly.

She asked: "What did you do with him?"

Ardanth regarded her somberly with his strange green eyes. He assured her, "He won't bother you again."

But she had to know, being female.

"First, I filled his pockets with gold."

"You did what?" she asked, startled.

Ardanth shrugged his broad shoulders and explained naïvely: "His object in coming here was personal gain, with the idea of making a little love besides. I filled his pockets to bulging with American gold pieces; his pants pockets, his jacket pockets, and his topcoat pockets. I would have given him a gunny sack full of gold besides, but he was already staggering with his load, and when I asked him he said he was satisfied, and he promised not to come back. A little quickly, I thought; without any doubt he was scheming to come back to the place where money was so easily acquired. Then I asked him whether he was thirsty. He said he was a little bit, and that he hadn't met anyone like me in quite a while. So I gave him a drink and sent him on his way."

"Dan, you're absolutely incredible," she said. "You didn't have to treat him to that extent. After all, he broke the law coming in here, and he hit me besides."

"Forget about him," Dan recommended. "He's gone; and I think I hit him harder than he hit you." That was true enough. "Where's the monocle?"

"It's still in the drawer where I hid it." She got it out, unrolling the slip. "He would have found it if he'd hunted very carefully."

The emerald lay on the soft silk in a circle of glittering, exciting frozen green, a miracle in the skill with which it had been cut. It had the quality of stealth, of a blind eye with a great brain behind it; and in it was concentrated the mysteriousness of a provocative sound heard briefly and only once, and never again no matter with what patience of listening.

Dan's tone was respectful. He said: "I've been thinking. I underestimated you at first, because it isn't pleasant to die even when you know that you'll be born again. You're very unusual, and I like you."

"I like you, too," she confessed softly, and batted her long eyelashes. If she let herself go she could have cried, she liked him so much.

His manner was still elegant and arrogant, and he stared as though her response didn't entertain him very much. He cleared his throat and asked suspiciously: "Of course, you've used the monocle? Looked through it, I mean."

"No," she said. "I mean yes, but it didn't do any good. I looked through it and it was blank, all dark."

"Extremely odd," said Ardanth. "Excuse me."

He picked up the monocle and screwed it into his eye, and for a moment watched critically something in the remote distance. He pried the monocle out of his eye and returned it to the pile of silk underthings.

"There's nothing wrong with it," he announced.

"It doesn't work for me."

"It must," he told her flatly. "The lens is transparent; you can see that it's transparent. Obviously, if you put it to your eye and you can't see through it, it's working."

"It doesn't make sense to me."

"When you walk from bright sunlight into a dark room, it takes a while for the rhodopsin to function. Visual purple. For your eyes to become adjusted. What is going to happen to you will occur in a dark place, and you didn't wait long enough. You didn't look through the lens long enough."

"All right, I didn't. And perhaps I don't want to."

"That's up to you. The monocle is yours to do with as you please. You can sell it for its carats in emerald, or throw it away, or what you like."

"That's what I almost did. Sell it."

"I know it. Didn't you believe me?"

"No. Obviously I didn't."

"I thought you wanted to sell it for another reason," he reflected. "So you're an ordinary little opinionated and faithless girl, after all."

"Suppose I tell you what I think of you."

"Suppose you do."

"Big as you are, you're the most conceited little boy in seven States and the District of Columbia."

Ardanth grinned, and the humor stole into his eyes. He said: "You'll get along."

He turned his back and started for the door.

"Why don't you vanish in thin air?" she asked bitterly.

He turned around in surprise and asked: "Why?"

"Just to show off."

"Hm-m-m," he decided, eying her. "Women have a habit of blaming men for everything wrong and convincing them, and you're no exception. It wasn't my fault that Hermann tried to rob you. You brought it on yourself by taking the emerald to that jeweler. You didn't believe me, and you never asked yourself what reason I might have for lying to you. When I told you that I was a sorcerer in Cebes, I meant that I was a sorcerer."

"This is 1939," said Connie.

"You've had that emerald for several hours," said Ardanth, "and you haven't taken advantage of it. You're not so secure as you think. You have your future planned in a cast-iron outline of Roman numerals and capital letters, and you allow nothing to chance. You don't allow for a broken leg, or falling in love and making a fool of yourself, or even a cheap episode like Hermann's trying to rob you. Or war."

His hand was on the doorknob.

"Ardanth," she said, delaying him, and he was annoyed.

"What?" He stared at her, and those cold green eyes of his were merciless. "Hurry up. I was busy, and I've stayed too long already."

She lighted a cigarette, turned her back on him and took a few steps, turned around again and expelled a deep breath in a sigh. She asked: "Can't you stay a little while?"

The sorcerer shook his head. "Lock your door. You won't be in any danger for a while. And I have work to do."

"I wish you wouldn't go."

He waited, looking at her, and when

she didn't say anything after a moment he shook his head. "Good-by," he said. "If you need me, call me, but don't ever call unless you're in trouble."

She ran to the door and threw her arms around him. "I don't want you to go," she said. "Please stay. I'm frightened."

"No, you're not. You're lying your little head off."

"I suppose it would be asking to much of you to kiss me good-by."

In the instantaneous encirclement of his arms she melted against him, and the kiss of their lips was as heady as the Song of Solomon. Afterward she leaned against the door with a stilly smile on her red mouth, and couldn't remember how long he had been gone. By some means of the most ingenious science she got to bed, because that was where she awakened in the morning.

Since the fall quarter at the U hadn't started yet, she had no work to do, and slept till eleven thirty. Connie had only two meals a day, anyhow—bruncheon and dinner—and the deaf Mrs. Horrigan prepared a sumptuous omelette in spite of Connie's protestations.

Mrs. Horrigan muttered darkly when she served it: "You'll find this is better than you think."

"You shouldn't have bothered," said Connie. She shook her head, still numb with sleep.

"I love you, too," said Mrs. Horrigan, irrelevantly. "You're a nice girl." She stalked back to the kitchen, stoop-shouldered.

The old men were snoring upstairs, having completed their strange nocturnal transactions, so Connie had the breakfast table to herself. She had a trifling hangover from the daiquiris, and considered going back to sleep until two or three o'clock before she took the trolley to the U and the library. Her eye fell on the folded morning newspaper, the Thurston *Citizen*, which was no longer fresh because Mrs. Horrigan had read it from end to end, and which was crimped between the heavy restaurant-crockery sugar bowl and a weighty, chipped, cut-glass decanter of soy sauce; Mrs. Horrigan liked chow mein and served it often along with egg foo yung dan and chop suey and other remote triumphs of Asiatic vegetables. Connie opened the newspaper.

On the front page was a remarkable item of news, and Connie stopped eating. She licked a crumb of egg off her lips, and laughed without meaning to laugh. She got up and lit a cigarette with maniacal nervousness.

She walked around Mrs. Horrigan's old, vaulted dining room and cringed from the fact of murder. Mrs. Horrigan came in from the kitchen and asked: "More toast? Bacon?"

"No, thank you," Connie said. She sat down, stunned.

THE item read:

> On the report of an airport mechanic who heard a shout and a splash, police fished a body from the river near the end of the bridge below the landing field. The drowned man was identified as Dick Hermann, a clerk in the Paulson jewelry store. Surprised at Hermann's weight, even if dripping wet, the police found his suit and topcoat pockets stuffed with gold pieces, the weight of which pulled him to the bottom like a shot when he fell, jumped, or was pushed to his death. Mr. Paulson could shed no light on where his employee acquired the wealth, nor the .38-caliber revolver found on him. Mr. Paulson has a gun permit, Hermann not.

Connie went up to her room, where she found that Mrs. Horrigan had already made the bed and tidied up and gone below to the kitchen to watch her light. She opened a new pack of cigarette, lighted one, and after the first exhalation of smoke called quietly: "Ardanth!"

The sorcerer opened the door on the wind that whipped through the room

"That emerald—I've got to have that emerald lens—" he whispered.

and stepped inside. He looked around for whatever danger was besetting her, and asked: "What's the matter now?" She eyed him steadily and accusingly, until he prompted irritably: "Well?"

"You pushed that man into the river. You loaded him down with gold so that he'd sink to the bottom at once. I suppose you think you have a sense of humor, asking him whether he wanted a drink!"

"Is that all you called me for?" he demanded. "I told you not to call me unless you were in trouble."

"But you murdered him! Don't you realize that? What did you do it for?"

"What I do when I am away from here, young lady, happens to concern you nothing. And it happens that I was working on something very important when you called me away just now."

"And I kissed you last night. You murderer!"

"Listen to me, said the sorcerer. "I did jostle Hermann somewhat on the bridge, but he had it coming to him. It happens that he committed a murder himself three years ago, and he was never going to get caught."

"How do you know that?"

"I have ways of finding such things out."

"Two wrongs still don't make a right."

"Don't pull that schoolbook stuff on me," he said contemptuously. "I know what I'm doing. And what are you so worried about? There isn't the slightest possible chance of your being connected with it."

"Suppose there isn't! How about yourself? You can't go around doing things like that!"

"I can't, eh?" he retorted, smiling. "Believe me, some mighty peculiar things are going to go on before I'm done, and don't think you can do anything about preventing them. Just keep an eye on the newspapers, and I'll show you some sorcery that is sorcery."

"I'm going to tell on you."

"No, you're not. Anyhow, who'd believe you?"

"You're going to be awfully, awfully sorry."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Ardanth, look; would you do something for me?"

"That," he said cautiously, "all depends. I can't keep on doing favors for you indefinitely if you're going to interrupt my work continually."

"Where were you when I called you?"

"This time?" he hedged. "The same place. Pretty far from here, and it wouldn't help you any to know the name of the place."

"What were you doing?" She was just keeping him now, struggling to decide how she should feel about him. He was such a big, handsome guy, and she would never meet anyone else like him. And he was champing at the bit after hinting that he might not answer her call next time.

"What I was doing," he said regretfully, "I am afraid, is a private matter. And I have to get back to it."

"Ardanth, look at me," she urged. "Look at me and promise that you'll never do anything like that again."

"I never heard a more preposterous proposition," he refused coldly. "Maybe I am obliged to you, but I've found it smarter not to be too scrupulous about obligations sometimes. Will you excuse me? Don't call me again unless you get into a real jam."

"Don't worry, I won't!" she said with sudden vehemence. "I hate you!"

"Really?" he asked. "And what difference does that make since I'm not in love with you? Not to say that you aren't unusually personable, which you are, as you know. In fact, your attractiveness is being wasted here. But you'd be surprised at the number of beautiful women in the world who are far more beautiful than you, and I'm

in a position to take my pick of the whole shebang."

"Is that all you're interested in? Women?"

"One of the things," he corrected. "After all, I'm male, and human."

"I'm beginning to doubt it."

"Good-by, then," he bade her gently, sighing. "Back to the grindstone. If I fail you the next time you call, don't call me names. Something may have happened to me."

"If you know what's going to happen, can't you do anything about it?" she asked.

"There is absolutely nothing to do about it." He was in the hall; he waved his hand at her and closed the door.

"Wait a minute!" she called. She ran to the door and wrenched it open, but the hall was empty. She hurried to the front window and looked out, and waited, but he hadn't left the house in that manner.

If he didn't want to come around he didn't have to, and she didn't dare call him when she didn't need him, for fear of his getting really mad at her. The weeks went by; she got her doctorate without any trouble; school started, and she was promised the teaching job she wanted, young as she was. And every time she opened her purse the emerald, kicking around among lipstick, powder, handkerchiefs, cash and feminine odds and ends, reminded her of Ardanth.

One night in her room at Mrs. Horrigan's, while she was playing with it, she yielded again to the temptation. She didn't know whether she ought to see what the monocle would show her, if it worked. What would happen to her tomorrow, next summer at the lake, or twenty years from now. She was a very brainy girl and a sensible girl in most respects, and her life was planned as carefully as a prisoner's. But she was decidedly female even at the quickest estimation, and she didn't know whether she wanted to see what she looked like as a wrinkled old hag, if this wasn't a cruel hoax of Ardanth's.

With a piece of tissue she polished the lens until it glittered, and picked it up by the rim. Otherwise clear, the field controlled by the lens went black when she brought it to her eye. She turned the light off, and looked as though to see her reflection in the mirror over the dresser.

It did not work. There was still nothing to be seen, no shapes to make out in the flat blackness, though she counted a hundred beats of her heart. That was long enough.

From transparency the lens darkened to a wafer of unrelieved jet when brought to her eye, and that was all. That was what was tantalizing, for there was no reason why such an optical phenomenon should occur; if things went that far, they should have gone farther, but what secret the emerald contained she could not find out.

And it was spring, and the third quarter at Sherwood U. Dewey Hudson, deferentially known as the Duke, the man whom Connie had watched being fitted for an English garment at Millikin's, had acquired the habit of hanging around her office. He used the most transparent, little-boy excuses and confessed as much.

"You know," he said, "it's getting so I have to resort to the most transparent lies in order to get in here. For example, I wanted some help on the paper due in 317A tomorrow. It was an easy job, and it's all done, and I've got it right here in my pocket."

"Well, there isn't much opportunity to be resourceful," she admitted, eying him.

"The idea is," he continued with unblushing savoir-faire, "that I'm graduating pretty soon—it's damned near June already—and I won't be seeing you any more."

"What I can't make out, Duke," she said, "is what a personage like yourself sees in a cluck of a girl like me."

He screwed his face up in temporary pain, and suggested, "Maybe it's because you take baths, and your skin is not like that of an old persimmon. Look, Connie; you're away ahead of me on brains and all that, but as pupil to teacher, ain't I a pretty nice guy?"

"What a lovely red apple," she murmured.

"Don't you ever go out or anything?"

"Of course I go out," she said with sudden decision. "Let's go down to Stiffy's Green Lantern and get numb."

He stared at her, savoring the bait. "I wonder," he wondered, "if it would make any difference if the president of the Council got stewed in public."

"I'm risking more than you are," she pointed out.

"Let's go," he said. "Right after graduation I'm getting a job with a man who used to be a Presbyterian minister and he wouldn't like it much, but that's neither here nor there."

In the booth at Stiffy's she said: "No beer. It doesn't work fast enough."

"You really meant it?" he asked. "You honestly want to get skizzled? I thought it would be dinner and a movie, or a drive or something."

"Would you rather?"

"You wouldn't, by any chance, be entertaining any ulterior motives?" he inquired with elaborate shrewdness.

"Candidly," she said, "I have an experiment in mind."

"Lady," the Duke said, "ply me."

She instructed the waiter, asking for less sugar and more authority in the brand of cocktail she liked. "Bring it with a motor attached," she admonished. "Twin cylinder."

He grinned understandingly, and the first pair of drinks were planted on the table.

"What's this experiment?" Duke asked.

"Have you ever been drunk?" she countered.

After a moment he admitted: "Yes. Several times, but it's a secret. What goes on?"

"Well, look," she said. "Suppose we got really loaded with the royal essence of oojie-boojie tonight. Tomorrow morning, would you remember everything that happened?"

"Would I?"

"Would you? I'm serious."

"No. After a certain stage, I— No."

"That's taken care of." She sighed. "Let's get going."

After making the glasses kiss, Duke raised his, sighted across the rim and took down the contents in a swallow. Big man, big swallow. Next time, Connie told the waiter to mix a shakerful of the same liquid dynamite. It was a dry drink whose pale, cool taste resembled the innocence of lemonade, but had properties never found in any lemon ever grown.

Two, three, four, five, six, seven, with numbers three and six on the house. Connie and Duke looked up to see Stiffy himself bending over them.

"Professor Schoenbaum in the end booth having the London broil, with milk," Stiffy reported.

"Let him ride," said Duke.

"O. K.," said Stiffy, worried. "If you don't laugh your heads off at any jokes, he won't know you're here."

When Stiffy had gone, Connie eyed Duke speculatively. She said: "You're not even started yet. I'm beginning to buzz."

"It's not a buzz, it's a hum."

"Do you hum?"

"I hum somewhat."

"Take three in a row, or can't you do it?"

"I've done it before," he said, troubled, "but I don't know about these. They've got something in 'm."

Connie stared at him with nothing but interest. A shakerful of cocktails arrived, and methodically Duke poured and drank down three in a row. He leaned and twisted his head to look at his car on the street in front, and hinted cautiously: "Maybe I won't be able to drive."

"Give your key to Stiffy, and he'll put the car up in back. We'll take a cab."

"All hp! . all right," said Duke. "Want one?"

"Still have one. Go ahead."

"I don't know," he said, enunciating carefully.

"Maybe I was wrong about you," she suggested, prodding him. "Go ahead; have another."

Her incredulity grew, but she was relieved when she saw his eyes glazing and partially unfocused after the thirteenth drink. She had stayed behind; he had gotten up to put some nickels into the record player, and when he got back she had lied, telling him that she had downed two. The flush in Duke's face had deepened, making his features rounded and boyish.

"Dance?" he asked.

"Wait a minute." She took the monocle from her purse and said: "Here's something I got from a novelty shop. Like this. Just look through it."

His hands held hers, and then he let them down slowly to the table edge, He stared, then screwed his left eye shut and squinted hard. His expression of happy inebriation faded and turned stupid and loose-jawed until he looked like a man who had been awakened by a thunderbolt.

He grabbed at her hand, and she jerked her arm back.

"Give me that!" he demanded. "How does that work?"

"It's just a gadget!" she protested. "What's the matter with you, Duke? There's no reason for getting excited."

His expression was still, flabber-

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gasted. The red in his face was angry, and he said: "Give that to me, Connie; I want to see it again."

"You're drunk. What did you see?"

"There was a man in there who looked just like me, except that he was older, and he died. How did— Give that to me, or I'll take it away from you!"

"Oh, no, you won't." She jumped up.

Duke sprang erect and reached for her with both arms. She ducked, got out of the booth and ran for the front doors with Duke chasing after her.

Out on the sidewalk she looked for a cab, and there weren't any; she looked back and saw that Stiffy had grabbed hold of Duke Hudson. Duke pushed him off, threw him a bill, and came tearing toward the doors.

A cab swung around the corner and Connie ran into the street. The cab came to a violent halt and she climbed in, but not soon enough. With a crazy jump from the curb, Hudson made the running board and got in with her. With the slam of the door he ordered: "Along the river road."

The driver knew how to shift gears, and the cab went down University toward the river in a smooth leap. Duke immediately grabbed for Connie's purse, and she slapped his hands. The two most important things in a man's life were birth and death, and Dewey Hudson had seen the latter. His. And he was drunk and determined; he got athletic and turned her arms behind her back without any trouble.

"Don't!" she protested, and her face went white.

"I told you I wanted that," he said in a crazy voice. He took both of her slim hands in one of his big meaty ones, and when he reached for her handbag he gave her arms an unintentional twist.

Bent double by the armlock, Connie groaned: "Ardanth! Ardanth!"

The driver turned his head for a glance, grinning from ear to ear, and while he fumbled in Connie's opened purse Duke said belligerently: "Watch the road!"

The door on the right, nearest Duke, was yanked open as a tall figure appeared on the running board.

With the most unadulterated astonishment, because the hack was moving so fast, Duke blurted: "Hey!" Then, "Get the hell out of here, buddy."

He cocked a leg and drove it toward Ardanth's midriff, with great strength and velocity. Duke weighed two hundred and twelve pounds and played football, whereas Ardanth had only the same height. He accepted Duke's foot in both hands and twisted. Duke came off the seat with a yell, letting go of Connie, and came down on the floorboards on his knees. Ardanth swarmed on top of him, while Connie drew her legs up on the seat, and the sorcerer did something to the back of Duke's head with his quick hands.

The driver was getting bothered, so Connie said: "It's all right. We're all friends."

They turned into the river road, which was forbidden for love-making if lovemakers got caught.

The hack slowed down to a crawl; Duke was limp and dreaming on the floorboards, underfoot. Connie pulled her skirt down over her knees, which were sticking up because her heels were on Duke's back.

"What's it all about now?" Ardanth inquired. "You took me away again."

"I took you away from what?"

"I was laying some fuses. Nothing is certain any more; there are some idiotic wars in the making, and I have to be sure that I'll be on hand next time. Do you understand? I was halfway across the Atlantic and was dropping bottles into the water when you called. I was filling them. The last bottle might be the one, and I have to make sure. So what's gone wrong now?"

She told him briefly, and he remarked: "A little streak of sadism in you, huh?" He sounded very much interested.

She protested, shaking her head and laughing with a touch of hysteria. "Oh, no, no," she said. "I showed him the monocle; I tried it out on him, and he saw something and wanted it, and chased me. He's drunk; tomorrow morning he won't remember anything."

"Yes, but what did you do it for?"

"I told you." She laughed again, running her fingers through her hair. "It doesn't work for me. It's just black. I can't see anything."

THE DRIVER turned his head and said: "How about it? The meter looks like we're going to Chicago."

"Stop for gas at the first station, and we'll start back," Ardanth said; and to Connie. "You couldn't see anything, nothing at all? That's very, very remarkable."

"I waited and counted up to a hundred, and there wasn't anything there at all. It was just all dark."

"Well, I'll be switched," said Ardanth thoughtfully. He took the emerald and glanced through it, gave it back to her. "That's the best sorcery there is, and it works, but you're just one of those people. The exception. It must be very dark where you're going to be, or you're going to get—"

He was going to say, "You're going to get blind."

Connie just sat, looking gloomily down past her round knees at the recumbent Duke Hudson. And Ardanth leaned back in deep thought, looking highly annoyed, moving his jaw around in his hand.

"Look," he said, "let me do something for you, and we'll call it square."

She turned her eyes to him and said: "All right; suppose you just stick around."

"I can't do that," he said apologetically. "I've got to lay some fuses. I don't know when I'm going to die, and the way things are now I don't know whether I'll ever be alive again, and I'm getting scared. It's getting to be a waste of time, burying bottles and manuscripts in the ground, because there's no telling where a bomb will land. I wouldn't want to show up in the midst of an explosion."

"Neither would I," she said faintly, looking out of the window at the night on the river. There was no wind, and the river was as smooth as a flow of gravy. Ardanth had drowned a man in that river.

They were approaching the outskirts of Thurston, and the U. Ardanth had the driver stop the cab, and hauled out the Duke onto the roadway.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Just lay him in the bushes," said Ardanth. "He's big and husky, and he can walk home when he sleeps it off. So long."

"But you're coming back."

"No, I'm not coming back." His voice was echolike, and he was already out of sight in the darkness, dragging Duke. "So long. You'll get along all right."

"It's damp; you'll catch your death of cold."

She heard a pleasant, low sound that was either his laughter or the water bubbling over stones along the river bank. She smoked a cigarette, and got out of the cab to strain her eyes looking for him in the darkness.

Every time she called, he had answered, and she called him now after she had given him plenty of time to lay the Duke in the handiest bushes. "Ardanth!"

He didn't come back, and the hack driver turned around and said: "You want me to go look for him?"

"No, this is a habit of his," she refused. "I'll call him once more, and if he doesn't answer, it means that he's gone." She stepped on her cigarette, and wet her lips and looked into the darkness. Her voice was steady when she called, concealing a strangling panic: *"Ardanth!"*

The only answer was the laughter of the water on the stones.

She got back into the cab and hauled the door shut, and gave the driver her address. Puzzled, the driver got under way slowly, but shortly they were bowling along at regulation speed. They entered the city.

She still had the monocle, which was of no use to her at all unless she wanted to sell it as a precious stone. It wouldn't work for her, and the secret would remain a secret. For other people, yes, but not for Connie Ydes. She would never know until the time came, but she could imagine, and her imaginings wrapped her heart in cold.

What was going to happen to her finally would happen in the darkest night. Or she might be blind. There wouldn't be any light, and it would just happen and be over with, and Connie wouldn't be around any more.

On a dark night she would awaken in her bed and wonder if it was going to happen. When it didn't, there would be the next time, and the next, and in a dark place her heart would always pound with fear.

It was a platitude that a human being began to die at the instant of birth. She hadn't minded the fact of having to die sometime, but the matter had become specialized through the very failure of the monocle. It would happen in the dark. And it was the waiting—

The Question Is Answered

The undead walk—naturally!

by STEWART TOLAND

DAVID MELLER leaned against the window and stared down his vest and across the gray coat that hung loosely on his stooped shoulders. Unwilling, frightened eyes traveled to the mirror, saw again the hole precisely in the center of his forehead, neat and round and deep. It was black, bruised, with powder stains about it. And it pierced his skull. Once again his hand moved up, hesitantly, a white finger disappeared in the hole, came out clean. Meller stared long and steadily at the finger. He was puzzled.

He knew that hole didn't belong there. Remembered even how it got there—an angry, desperate man with a gun, a blinding flash, searing pain, then blessed darkness.

It had been morning when David Meller woke and he was on his bed. Sunlight filled the room. His door was closed, but what was strange was that he was fully clothed; even his shoes were on his feet. He had gotten up, chagrined, a bit amused. Then he had seen the hole.

Meller glanced up from his finger and out the window. The world seemed the same as always—maybe even a bit brighter—a little bit more to be desired. Yet he had a strange feeling—

The gray eyes stared at the waving trees, at the green grass below. A bird hopped busily among the flowers. A dog frolicked across the street, even the butterflies were out honey suckling. Everything was peace. Yet still he had that strange feeling—the feeling he didn't belong.

Sounds came from below. A pan rattled, footsteps mounted the stairs. Resolutely Meller crossed to the door, reached for the knob, but he didn't turn it—he couldn't. He stared down at his white knuckles balled on the bit of glass and knew that he was afraid—afraid of the answer to the question: Was he alive or dead?

The person outside came up on the landing, passed quickly by the closed door. Meller wanted to scream, to demand breakfast, the paper, anything. He wanted to thrust the door wide, to see someone smile at him with friendly, unafraid eyes. But he didn't. Instead he crossed back to the window and his fingers fumbled jerkily across his forehead. A finger slipped into the hole, as the tongue slips of itself into the hole a pulled tooth leaves.

Someone was coming up the walk. The gray eyes peered out, smiled. A thin woman with a tiny, pointed nose stood on the doorstep. David had often joked about that nose. He'd told his wife that Mrs. Perry had worn it away by keeping it in other people's business all the time—that if she kept on she'd have to begin breathing through her mouth.

Mrs. Perry came into the house and the door slammed behind her. Meller shrugged. Women were such fools. They could make so much out of so little. Now, if she knew about that hole in his head—

The downstairs door opened. Mrs. Perry was not staying; she was leaving and she was crying. Meller leaned forward, intent, eager. "What could have made that hag cry?" he mused. "She couldn't even squeeze out a tear for her own funeral. Funeral—" The word

chilled him and he didn't think for a few minutes. He didn't dare.

AGAIN there were footsteps on the walk. Meller turned impatiently toward the door. "What is this house?" he growled silently. "A thoroughfare? Can't a man have privacy in his own home?" But he didn't reach the door. He didn't even leave the window.

The man outside had been to the house before. He had come at night, just last night, carrying a revolver and hate. Hate that had made him want to kill a fellow creature, a man who had called him friend. But that was before Meller had found out about the embezzlement.

The two had met in the hall in the office yesterday afternoon. Meller had told him of his findings on the company's book—had given him twenty-four hours to restore the money. Today was the day Meller was going to tell the boss at the office. Meller stirred uneasily. His wife was on the doorstep. The gray eyes pressed against the window, saw her smile, invite the man in.

David was shocked. His wife looked haggard, old. Her face seemed white and drawn, but what worried him most was that she had asked that man in—that she was entertaining a thief!

The stooped shoulders drooped a bit more; then, in a flash, it came to him. He'd been stupid not to remember it. His wife didn't know Tom was a thief. "How could she?" he asked himself. She had been at her mother's the day before; didn't return, in fact, until—until— The gray eyes roved restlessly about the room; he couldn't remember when she did come back.

That only puzzled him for a moment. The important thing was that she didn't know—and that Tom was with her now. Meller started across the room toward the door. The glass knob leered up at him and he stopped. Fear crept across his face. He knew he couldn't speak. His throat was dry, his tongue stiff. Once he opened his mouth, once he gave way to the pounding impulse in his brain, he knew he would scream—scream the question he couldn't forget. Yet his wife must be told, carefully, gently. She had looked so ill but a moment before.

The white hands knotted together and Meller stared moodily at them. "What was he to do?" he wondered. "What would a gentleman do? Write! That was it! He'd write her a note and take it down to her." A smile swept the fear off his face and he crossed to his desk.

The note was short, the pen hard to work. It seemed heavy and stubborn. Meller picked the scrawl up and read it over:

"DEAREST:

"Tom is a thief. He has embezzled fifty thousand at the office. I told him I knew and he said he ought to kill me. Don't let him come here any more. He's dangerous and he has a gun. I know. I saw it last night.

"Yours always,

"DAVID."

For a long time after he wrote the note he stood and stared at it. It hung stiffly between his fingers, mute—futile. Would his wife believe?

Footsteps passed down the walk. He heard their echo, looked up. His wife was driving off in someone's car. Dr. Baker's it was. That old rattletrap. Meller scowled. She had gone away and left Tom downstairs.

He and Tom were alone—like they had been last night.

Meller leaned close to the mirror, so close as to almost touch it with his face. He had to see his forehead—to see the hole in it again. It was there. It had to be there. His fingers fumbled at his brow. He crossed to the door. He didn't see the knob, didn't feel it as he turned it and swung the door wide.

Tom sat in the one easy-chair. He was smoking, relaxed. A smile parted his lips, showed even teeth. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, yawned. When he opened them he stopped breathing. David was before him—walking toward him—slowly, step by step drawing nearer—nearer. David with a white paper in his hand and a hole in his forehead. Tom remembered that hole. It had stopped bleeding now.

Tom never knew he screamed.

But David knew. It echoed in his brain. He leaned forward, thrust the paper before Tom's ashen face. Tom was cold now, too. Clammy. Bulging eyes followed the writing. Tom grabbed the paper, tore it. "Go away!" he sobbed. "Oh, God go away!"

David stayed. He towered over the shaking, huddled figure in the chair.

"What are you?" Tom bit his fingers, tried to stop their trembling. "Are you alive or dead?"

"I'm dead." The words were halting, hoarse. "The flowers I'm dead. This room is filled with flowers. Can't you smell them? I'm dead because you killed me—"

"But that isn't possible! It can't be! Dead men are dead!"

David Meller had wondered about that, too. He put his finger in the yawning hole in his head, drew it out—held it before Tom's blood-rimmed eyes.

Tom scrambled over the side of the chair. In his frenzy it didn't seem strange, or ludicrous, or impossible. David was in front of the chair, blocking his way, almost touching his knees. He couldn't let David touch him. He crouched behind the chair in the corner, strove to steady the ghastly knocking in his heart—tried to see if David was breathing. He had to be. For if he wasn't—if it was a corpse before him, a dead man sticking his finger inside that ghoulish hole— Tom fought for sanity.

"David," he gasped, "I didn't mean to do it. Not really. I was afraid, afraid of disgrace." The words were low, halting, thick. Craftiness came into his face as he pleaded. He'd fool David into thinking it was an accident. That everything would be all right. "I bought the gun yesterday, planning to frighten you into silence. I didn't know it was loaded not until after I shot you. I threw it away last night, in the river. I'll put the money back at the office.

I'll give you and Mary money everything I have do anything only go away go back to the heaven or hell you came from!"

A car rolled down the street outside, stopped before the house. Meller looked out the window. A second passed, two seconds, and still he stood and stared. Shuffling feet came up the walk to the open door, crossed over the threshold into the parlor and put a long box on little folding trestles. Meller put his hand over his forehead, kept it there.

Men grunted, wiped perspiring brows, and walked softly out of the door.

THE gray eyes left the window, left Tom, as Meller crossed the room. A thousand years passed in one minute as he looked down. Once again his hand wavered up, one finger crept inside the hole. He couldn't seem to keep out of it, nor forget it. The gray eyes turned back to the man cowering in the corner.

"It was you, Tom"—Meller leaned against polished wood, steadied himself—"who brought me this."

Then he began to laugh. Laughter that echoed and re-echoed. Laughter that seemed to grow into a mighty roar.

Tom listened, twitching with terror, bathed with his own sweat, heady with the perfume of flowers—flowers sent to a dead man.

Meller moved, started toward him. Neither heard the car stop outside. Shrieking insanely, Tom raced for the door. He came into sunlight but he couldn't feel it, didn't see it. The doctor was on the walk and Mary—Mary could stop David. The dead would obey the one it loved.

"I did it!" he babbled. "Oh, God, I did it! I shot him, but I didn't think he could come back! Oh, God—"

The laughter died. Meller watched as the doctor and Mary bent over Tom where he had fainted. The gray eyes moved. A whisper breathed through the room: "There's a hole in my head. I can feel it. There's a coffin in the parlor. I can see it. I must be a corpse and I shouldn't be here."

Words came dimly up the walk, answered the question that had been beating in his brain. "What did Tom mean, doctor?" Mary sounded strange. "Did he mean that David has come back alive?" She looked at the house in wonder—in fear.

Dr. Baker squinted up from where he was kneeling. "I don't know, my dear. We shall have to see." He stood up. "I certainly thought David was dead, but a bullet can pass between the two halves of a person's brain, sending him into a coma that resembles death—and live. It has happened before." He smiled at the surging hope in her pinched, white face. "Let us hope it has happened again."

Once more Meller murmured: "There's a coffin in the parlor. I can see it. I ought to be a corpse today." Lips pulled tight over white, glistening teeth, forced upward in a haunting, mocking grin. "But I'm not!"

And David Meller moved back—back—back until he touched a chair and sat down to wait for Mary.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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Continued from page 78

tery of the devil-grass. But Visimar fixed his magic mask about his face and took his sword in hand and went, with taut muscles, in the wake of the deliverer, of whom there was no trace at all.

It seemed to Visimar that, dimly, he caught the present twang of a bowstring and, at intervals thereafter, it spoke in the slowly graying light of dawn. It was when the red wash of the rising sun stained the east that he heard the cry; heard it begun high and terrible in the half-light and soar upward until he could no longer hear any sound; yet he felt the aching of the cry in his ears. Visimar swore, for he knew that, in walled Byoko, magic ears would hear that cry, and the crystal globe on its crest which Wan Tengri had described, would point the direction of the cry by the way the enchanted ants within it reacted to the vibration of the globe. And a swift legion would march to destroy them! And Visimar was afraid, and trembled in the high grass while he waited for the sun to lift, and for the shield of Wan Tengri to send its summons to battle. His eyes strained toward the hill when the first red lance of the sun struck across the white mist that hovered over the sea of Buryat, and a great cry swelled against Visimar's throat—and died there. Gratefulness filled his belly. For there, upon the topmost point of the hill of bears, stood the deliverer!

Wan Tengri's broad face beneath the horned helmet stared into the rising sun, and the staining of those first rays touched as with blood the helmet shield, and the naked sword in his hand. For a dozen breaths, until he was sure all the hundred had seen him, Wan Tengri stood poised so against the morning sky. He turned then, and sent his stern gaze probing out into the grass—and he struck the flat of his sword against the shield. The harsh voice of the metal sang out over the levels of grass, and hoarse shouts from a hundred throats answered him. He saw the high flash of drawn steel, and the violent waving of the grass as the hundred charged forward in straight lines toward the base of the hill. Now and then he caught the glint of the early sun upon metal to eastward; but the men to the west had moved into the purple shadow of the hill.

At varying points, he saw those waverings of grass check for a moment, and then begin again more violently, and he smiled in his beard. Each one of those checking men marked the death-place of one of the Tinsunchi, each of whom bore now in his breast the horse-hair tufted arrow of Wan Tengri! The last of the bearded devils, he who had screamed, lay beside the stone stockade that held in the herd of bears. Perhaps it had been a vainglorious thing to slay all these Tinsunchi single-handed, but it would add to his stature in the eyes of his men, whether they thought him a great sorcerer or a finer warrior, which was as well since his force was so small.

Wan Tengri folded his bronzed arms across his deep chest and waited then until the last wavering in the grass had stilled, and all the hundred were crouched just in the margin of the sea

as he had bidden them. He sent his heavy voice rolling toward them.

"Come, my brave ones!" he cried. "There is food to fill the bellies of men —and afterward there is fighting to fill the bellies of warriors!"

They came leaping up the rocky slope toward him, and there was fierceness and awe upon their faces, but Visimar ran more swiftly than all and threw himself on his knee before Wan Tengri, and lifted his sword in brilliant salute.

"Hail, deliverer!" His voice soared. "Thy magic is all-powerful, lord! We follow you to the conquest of Byoko!"

A great shout lifted from the assembled men and their swords flashed high in tribute. Wan Tengri acknowledged it with a careless lift in his hand, but his shoulders swayed in a little swagger as he turned away.

"Loot and eat," he called, and dropped his hand heavily upon Visimar's shoulder. "Your men obey orders, Visimar, *anda*. By that same token, we will conquer! And worry not that one of the Tinsunchi sent his summons to Byoko with a scream. The same wind that bore his voice cannot bring the Heaven-Bear against us. When the sun sinks to the west again, we will be ready for the Tinsunchi who march against us. It is what I had planned upon, and it was for that reason I permitted the last of the grass-devils to wail his despair to his masters."

"Lord," said Visimar humbly, "you art all-wise, and all-conquering. With thee to lead us, we hundred men can conquer the world!"

Wan Tengri swaggered his shoulders a little, and his smile broadened in his beard. He looked down where the hundred men were stuffing food into their mouths, and toward the stockade where the uneasy bears were snuffling, and he lifted a hand to touch the bit of the True Cross about his neck. He cleared his throat cautiously.

"And, of course, Visimar, there is the help of Christos," he said.

IX.

As Wan Tengri had foreseen, it was a legion of the Tinsunchi that marched the dusty high road toward the hill of bears whence the summons had come at dawn, for Aosoka no longer trusted his captive legions since this red-headed devil, Wan Tengri, had vanished into the very air above his head. There was, too, a rumor abroad in the city which made men walk uneasily and which caused Aosoka, on his golden bed, to curse in a complaining voice at the women who perfumed and curled his long hair.

Once he had thought the olden prophecies guaranteed to Byoko and his throne an eternal fame, for had not the soothsayers foretold that it should endure until the Great Bear should leave the heavens, and march upon his chosen people? And surely, nothing was so fixed and unchanging as the great constellation that swung in stately grandeur about the red northern star! Yet now men whispered in the streets that, on this day, or the morrow, the Heaven-Bear would turn upon his own!

So Aosoka consulted feverishly with his astrologers and his shrill voice whined in complaint, and the *kohl* about his eyes was smeary with neglect, and there were two curls which hung limp and neglected upon his shoulders—so he trusted not his red legions and ordered more archers to the Gate of the Barbarians; and an apprehensive double-hundred of the Tinsunchi, unused to such long forced marches, straggled along the high road toward the hill of bears. Their spears slanted at two hundred different angles and their eyes stole off toward the high grass that marched and whispered beside them; the high grass that for so long had been their friend and protector, and now might

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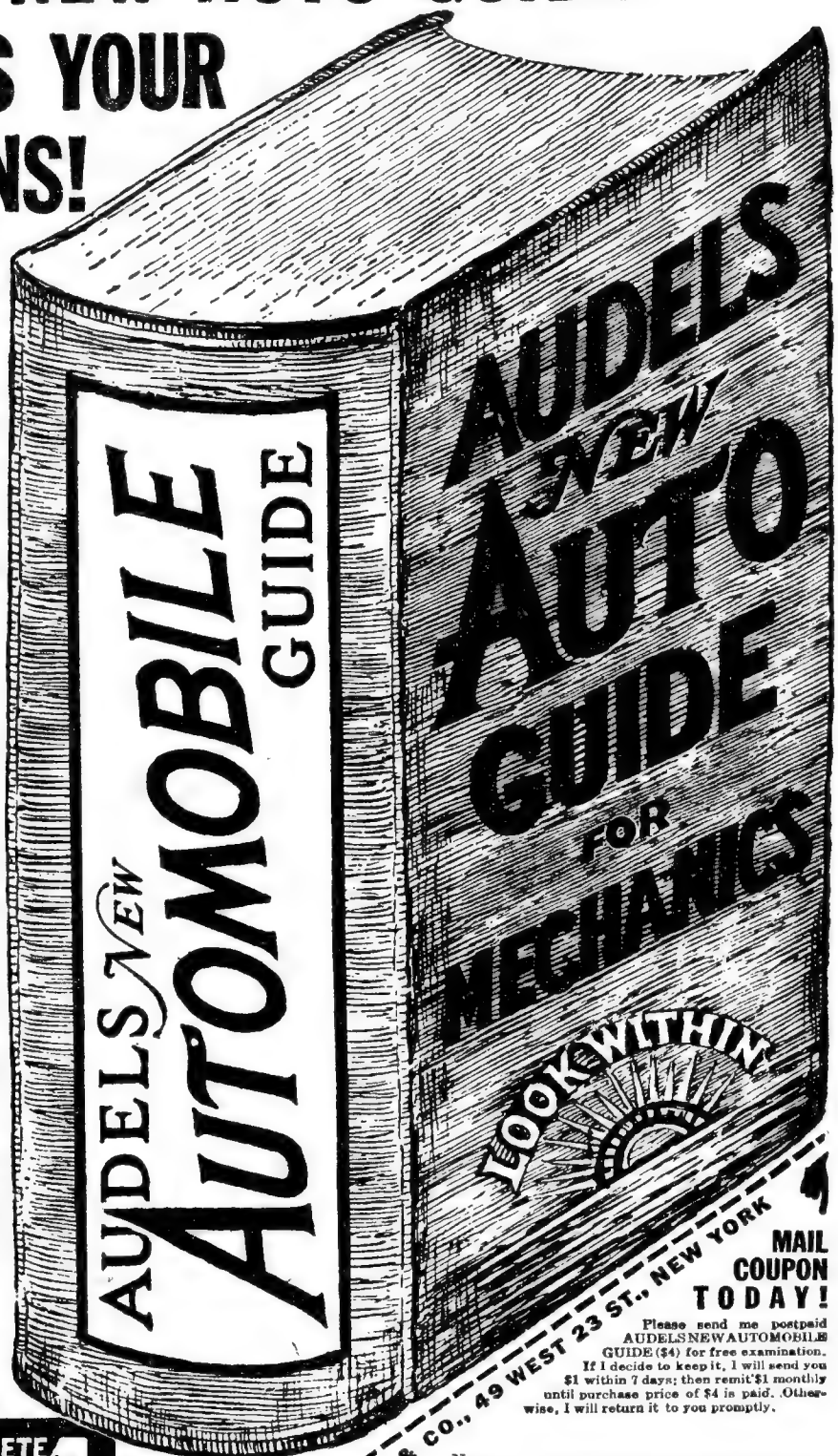

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hide . anything. The sun burned in their eyes, and the dust of the road coated their sweating bodies and clogged their hairy nostrils, and the smell of decay that lifted, hot and heavy, about them was an ominous thing.

So they marched throughout the long morning and, when the midday eating was finished, the captains must strike about with the flat of the sword to urge these men to marching again. And the Hour of the Rat dragged past, and the Ox and the Tiger and their spears trailed in the dust; and the Hour of the Hare limped past, and the Dragon, and their stumbling weary feet made scarce any progress at all; and the Hour of the Serpent pulled by its weary length and it was in the Hour of the Sheep that at last the hunchbacked loom of the hill of bears raised its wavering lines before their reddened eyes. The Hour of the cowardly Sheep, when darkness was gathering around the roots of the reeds, and the sorcerous white mist that rose with evening, writhed like a serpent through the hollows of the waves of the sea of Buryat.

And the captain of the Tinsunchi lifted his weary, dogged eyes from the dust where he stumbled ahead of his men and stared along the glimmer of the white road toward the hill of bears. Refuge and rest there, when they had swept aside whatever peril threatened. When— His eyes quested back doubtfully over the straggling ranks of the men and he shouted at them with a voice grown hoarse with useless exhortations. A few dull eyes lifted, but no more than that, and the line straightened not at all. He pleaded with them, and held out the hope of rest and food—when they had won it, and a few more looked toward him, and beyond him.

The captain strode closer to the man who looked beyond and prodded him with words. "It is there we rest on the hill of our ancestors, the bears," he urged. "Show but for a brief while the courage of the sons of the bears, and there will be rest and feasting!

The eyes of the man who stared beyond him focused slowly, and then they strained wide and terrible. He made a hoarse sound like a sob and dragged his

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State of New York, County of New York (*ss.*)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Unknown, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.: *editor*, John W. Campbell, Jr., 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, none; *business managers*, none.

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1939. De Witt C. Van Valkenburgh, Notary Public No. 24, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1940.)

hairy forearm across his eyes and stared again. And the sob became a scream, harsh with terror! He pointed a rigid arm along the dusty road and squeezed out individual words that creaked with his fright.

"The bear, captain! The Heaven-Bear-that-walks-like-a-man! He is marching against us!"

THE CAPTAIN whirled and fought against the cry that lifted in quavering fright to his own throat, and behind him, a hundred voices picked up the shout. There was the clatter of weapons, but they were weapons that had been thrown to the road. The captain swore in despair. He drew his long curved sword and set himself in the middle of the road and death was in his heart, for what his eyes saw, his soul could not believe —yet knew it for truth!

Marching toward him, as steadily as ever a red legion swung, was a double file of bears who strode like men. Their mouths snarled open redly, and their great bodies reared higher than even the heads of the red legion. And between each two of the bears-that-walked-like-men, there were two other bears that shuffled along on all fours, like the lions of war that the Persians were said to train! The leader of the bears was greater than all the rest, and he paused to point a rigid, claw-armed forepaw toward the Tinsunchin, and a snarl of rage lifted from the marching bears, and they began to trot more swiftly!

Terror loosened the wearied limbs of the captain of the Tinsunchi. With a scream, he flung his sword from him and turned to flee. He staggered as he ran down the middle of the high road, and there was not any man in his way. The dusty path was littered with spears and shields, and the dust was thick. It had swallowed up the legion of the Tinsunchi, and the ragged thud of their running feet, the hoarse shouts of their terror came back to him terribly. He ran —and a blow that was pain took him between the shoulders and he pitched hard forward in the dust of the road with an arrow rooted in his back, so that his feet jerked upward with the violence of his fall, and afterward scrabbled in the dust a little before he was still. The dust had filled his mouth and glazing eyes lifted in a little white cloud above him and, settling, then vanishing into the swift-coming dusk, carried off his soul.

The bear legion swung along the road at the steady trot of men to whom marching is life, and as they passed, a sword glittered in the air and swept down, to part the captain's head from his trunk, but not much blood flowed out to clot the white dust, for he was already dead. The lines of the upright bear legion swung past, and the snuffling bears, yoked two and two, and bound by ropes to the waists of opposite warriors, snorted in terror past his corpse. And then the dust swallowed them, too. The captain's body lay prone, in the flattening of death, and his head had rolled so that sightless, dust-filled eyes turned upward toward the darkening heavens. And in the high grass, a raccoon-dog yelped, and was answered by another. When they yelped again, they were nearer—nearer to the road where Conquest had trod its mailed feet.

At the head of his red legion, bodies clothed in the hides of the bears they had slain, Wan Tengri ran steadily and swore at the heat and the stiffening weight of the raw skin that he wore. A pale moon swam its way up the heavens, and white dust mingled with the white mist of the devil-grass and laid a low blanket across the road above which men's heads bobbed like disembodied beasts. The legion slowed its trot to a walk, and picked up the trot again. At the hour, Wan Tengri called a halt and men flung themselves down in the dust to rest, to chew at sun-dried bear meat, and to laugh and jest roughly with one

another. All save the six who ran in the front ranks carried their bearskins upon their shoulders now, and those six were changed at each rest period.

They ran and walked and rested, and yet swiftly they overhauled the terror-mad Tinsunchi. Again and again, the bowstring twanged and, presently, a sword swung high and struck downward at a body in the dust. The small bearded men sought refuge in the high grass beside the road, but they fled there only as a last resort, when exhaustion and the steady, inexorable *pound-pound* of the marching bears came too close. So that they fled too late, and the searching arrows found them out, and on each flank, there were men who came with their heavy swords to make sure of death.

At last, the east was graying, and the sun's orb thrust up bloodily as befitted the day that followed such slaughter—and Wan Tengri called a halt where the walls of Byoko loomed redly and a scant dozen of the Tinsunchi still staggered ahead of them toward the gates of the city.

Crouched low in the high grass, Wan Tengri faced the grim, dusty warriors, weary with the road and the slaughter, but fierce with the wine of victory in their throats.

"It is time," Wan Tengri said harshly, "to strike the final blow at Byoko. Those fools who escaped will tell of the slaughter on the road, but they will know only that the marching bears pursued them all the long way back to Byoko, and that their brothers-in-arms perished. To them, it is magic. Remember that, men of Visimar, and of Amlairic, when next you fear magic. And it may be that you will meet magic defending the walls of Byoko. Some magic can kill, but a man who cuts out terror from his breast is armed five-fold against all sorceries. I, Amlairic, the Deliverer, tell you this. And you have seen the proof!"

He looked about him with his gray brooding eyes, and they were sunken with the fatigue of the hard marching they had done; and there were grim lines streaking the dust of his face, and grimmer fires in his eyes. The captive, half-tamed bears of the stockade, yoked two-and-two, panted like dogs and soaked their long fur in the ditch-water along the road. The sun slanting through the thick reeds laid close bars of shadow and brown sunlight across their backs, and the close, hot smell of them filled the air. Wan Tengri arched his nostrils at the sun-rotting stench of the raw hide fastened about his shoulders, but he did not loosen it.

"You have seen," he said, "the great Heaven-Bear gallop across the tops of the grass, and have seen it strike low the enemies of the Tinsunchi. Today, I release the Heaven-Bear upon Byoko! I shall endow you with my magic, so that you may share in this sorcery!"

The faces of the legion creased in grins, and yet there was awe in their eyes, and Wan Tengri was well pleased. He would make these men his body-guards and his lords when he was on the throne of Aosoka and they must not lose that awe, if Prester John was to rule long in this city and empire of his choice!

"These are my orders," he said curtly. "See to it that you obey to the word or my magic will destroy you!"

On the walls of Byoko, the bearded guards saw the straggling remnant of the double-hundred that had set forth so bravely in the previous dawn, and they sounded the trumpets of alarm. Armored men marched forth from the Gate of the Dawn to succor the survivors and, afterward, they gazed back in terror as they fled to the protection of the walls of Byoko. The word was carried by swift runner to the palace of

Aosoka and, on his golden bear-throne, Aosoka trembled and cried out in terror —and struck his dagger into the heart of the messenger.

He stood before the bear-throne then, with blood on his carefully tended fat hand, and shouted at his guard in his shrill voice. "This man lied!" he said savagely. "Do you hear? He lied! Bears do not march like men, and they do not fight like a legion! They could not destroy their grandsons upon the Road of the Heaven-Bear! If any man repeat these lies, his tongue shall be torn out, and his bowels shall grace the Gate of the Barbarians! Aosoka has spoken!"

And even as he spoke, there was a thin distant wailing outside the palace, for there were a dozen men whose hearts had been pierced by the dagger of fear, and what they had seen they shrieked in the streets of Byoko. Men and women poured from the brazen doors of their homes, or leaned over the low parapets of their roofs and the word of the terror spread. Bears that walked like men had turned upon the legions of the Tinsunchi and had destroyed all save these dozen upon the Road of the Heaven-Bear, had followed even to the gates of the city—and the old, direful prophecy was fulfilled!

The Tinsunchi streamed into the streets and flowed in a great, brawling river to the palace, and they walked where men had only dared to crawl before they clamored at the brazen doors of the throne-room which Wan Tengri once had burst asunder. They lifted their voices in lamentations and in sorrow, crying out to Aosoka.

"Save us, master!" they cried. "Save us, Aosoka, from the anger of the Heaven-Bear! Make sacrifices to the Bear! Call on thy magic! Save us from the wrath of our gods!"

Clutching his padded hands upon the paw-arms of the Bear-throne, Aosoka heard and dared not open the doors, but sent his guards by circuitous ways to drive the people from the palace. He sent his trumpeters and his drummers

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through the streets to summon the people to sacrifice in the temple of the Heaven-Bear, and bade every woman bring her most precious possessions that the Heaven-Bear be appeased. The throngs crushed into the temple and offered their jewels with high-held, pleading hands, and the avenue before the temple was black with crowding people. Children fell and were trampled beneath panic feet, and women were suffocated upright. The hairy legions marched to the walls and stood grimly at watch, with their bows strung, and their long spears with their slashing blades held in readiness. But their faces were pale, and their eyes flinched ever toward the smoke of sacrifice rising above the temple of the Bear, and they were afraid.

And all this was before Wan Tengri had launched his magic against the walls of Byoko.

PRESENTLY, voices that were hoarse and snarling as the voices of bears, cried up to the walls of Byoko in the language of the Tinsunchi, saying:

"The Great Bear turns on the people who have forgotten him! The Heaven-Bear will walk over the grass, over the sea of Buryat, and woe to those who stand in his path! Flee, men of Byoko, flee, thou false sons of the Bear! Flee while there yet is time!"

The guard upon the wall wailed in terror, and many would have fled, but that their trembling officers turned them back with drawn swords. And some flung themselves into the moat beneath the walls and drowned because they did not dare to live.

In the high grass, beyond the green walls of *gangika* that surrounded the moat of Byoko, Wan Tengri returned to the rendezvous of his men, and there was grim laughter on his lips. He pointed to the small hot fire he had caused to be kindled.

"Light your torches here, thou bears," he grumbled at the men, masked now in their thick, brown furs. "Spread

everywhere along the east wall of Byoko, but nowhere else, and touch fire to the dry grass. If the *gangika,* the *kentyr* as you call it, will not burn, hack it down with your swords and throw the buds upon the flames but take care that you do not suck in the smoke. When it rises, thick and black, over Byoko, when the laughter of death seizes on the guards of the wall, come here to the road of the Heaven-Bear, for it will be time—time for the Heaven-Bear to march upon Byoko!"

The men answered him with a muffled shout and thrust prepared torches into the fire and Wan Tengri waited with Visimar where the captive bears were tied to stakes. The beasts snuffed uneasily the scent of the fire, and they whined in their throats, and there was a restlessness upon them. A step forward they took and swayed their heads, and a step back and swayed the other way. Over and over, in their restlessness and their fear. Wan Tengri grinned upon them.

"Fear not, thou small Heaven-Bears," he rumbled. "There will be feasting for thee this day!"

The grass crackled under the torches, and spurts of flame leapt hight, and the tall tops fell forward and the wind swept a wall of hot fire against the towering *gangika,* the plants from which hemp is taken, so that the green leaves withered, and dark fumes swirled upward from them. The tall stalks bowed with the heat, and the buds fell with small resinous cracklings into the fire—and the fumes were thicker and darker. They merged into a great, black cloud, rolling across the moat, climbing heavily up the white walls of Byoko.

Wan Tengri waited, with the grim smile on his lips, and Visimar stood beside him, with wonder wide in his eyes. " 'Tis naught but smoke," he said uncertainly. "How is it that they will envisage the Heaven-Bear? What of this laughter of death?"

Wan Tengri grumbled in his beard and did not tell him of the hemp-eaters of far Hind. "How was it that on a certain night, you did hear sounds from far Byoko, and that colors did speak to you and sounds were like the sky at dawning? I have put into the minds of the guards upon the wall that the Heaven-Bear will charge upon them—and the dreams of my magic, Visimar, bring not always pleasant things!"

"Thy magic!" Visimar sucked in a breath of awe. "Master, lord, I had forgot!"

Wan Tengri laughed shortly. "The Tinsunchi will not forget!"

THE BLACK FUMES, the brown swirling fumes, and acrid smoke lifted above the walls of Byoko and the wails of terror were broken by fits of hard coughing. Guards fired their bows vainly into the darkness, and blindly under the urging of their captains, for their fear was a great and awful thing. The laughter of the *gangika;* the hemp seized them by the throats, and shook their sides, and there was no strength in them, and they saw that it was not smoke that swirled upon them, but that the Great Heaven-Bear was walking across the grass to wreak his wrath! And they turned, still terribly laughing, and slew their captains. They poured down from the walls and fled, screaming their terrors between the gusts of uncontrollable laughter.

Aosoka left his golden throne and walked in dirt-strewn clothing, with dust upon his head, through the streets of Byoko. He waddled his fat, unaccustomed way barefooted over the cobbles of the street, and he whimpered when they cut his tender soles. He sent his favorite, most lovely slaves to be slain as a sacrifice before the Great Bear, and frantic men and women flung their sons and daughters upon the altars until the arms of the priests were red and smoking to the shoulders with their blood,

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until the sacrificial knives were dulled with death, and the priests were weary and sick. And still the hosts of the Great Bear swirled dark fumes down within the walls, borne on the breath of the gentle dawn-wind. It filtered into houses, and into the very temple of the Great Bear, and the awful laughter seized upon the men and the women of Byoko. And it brought madness.

In the high grass, behind the wall of fire and smoke, Wan Tengri deemed that the hour was ripe. He called his men before him, and saw that their grease-smeared masks of hair were over their faces, and the hides of the bears upon their bodies. The restless bears were yoked and roped, and Wan Tengri stood before the men.

"My magic has prepared the way," he said roughly. "You will find naught but men stricken with helpless laughter to oppose you, and the sight of you will turn their bones to water. Slay! Slay to end the slavery of your people! When the fighting is done, I will give the city over to sack, save that a half of all the riches must come to . must be offered to Christos, and to me, who am his priest. But wait! If any man turn aside from his path to loot before I have given the word, my magic, the mighty magic of Amlairic, will point him out! And he shall be pulled to pieces gradually as men dissect a bug! His hands and feet, his legs and his arms, and finally but not too soon, his head shall be pulled from his shoulders. Amlairic has spoken!"

A shudder went through the ranks and a moaned answer rose from them. "Lord, we hear and obey!"

"It is well," Wan Tengri said grimly. "March and slay!"

"March and slay!" They echoed his words, and the bear legion swung into the Road of the Heaven-Bear from which Wan Tengri's orders, and the ditches of water had kept the fire, and they marched toward the Gate of the Dawn!

Few there were upon the walls to wit-

ness the coming; few save the chief officers of the legion, and they, through their streaming eyes, through the mad laughter that shook them without ceasing, saw the legion of the bears that walked as men, and their captive brethren who shuffled on leashes like fighting lions, and there was no more strength for fighting within them. A man in a brazen helmet stood upon the bulwarks and pitched head-first to the roadway before the gate, but the others fled in terror and their screams brought the final disaster.

Wan Tengri's men marched steadily and, as they advanced, the brazen gates swung wide and, from the shadows, Thanamund coughed and laughed terribly, between his greetings to the Heaven-Bear. "Master," he gasped, "all is prepared and we await thee in the throne-room of Aosoka at the Hour of the Bear!"

He waited until the legion of the bear had marched past, and then he slipped to the secret underground ways he knew, where as yet the fumes had not penetrated, and he fled swiftly—but Wan Tengri barely acknowledged his words with a lift of his sword in the hand to which the fur and the claw of a bear had been thonged. The bows of the legion were speaking and men, unstrung by laughter, fell choking in the streets of Byoko. The swords rose and fell, and sharp daggers slit through the hairy throats. Where the legion of the bear passed, no living thing remained. And no man left the ranks for looting.

Panic spread ahead of their march, and the great throng in the temple of the Bear despaired and fled. They trampled one another in their eagerness to escape, and brother slew brother who stood in his path, and the madness of the laughter shook them. They flung wide the gates of the city and they poured out upon the roads that traversed the sea of Buryat. They flung aside their weapons and their wealth, and anything that might be a burden upon their speed—and Wan Tengri judged the time was ripe.

"The city is conquered, Visimar," he said then, hoarsely, because of his slaughter-dried throat. "But there is still much killing to be done, and the arms of our men are weary. Go thou, and bring the red legion to the slaughter—but the looting must wait, under the penalty of the death I have ordered."

"Amlairic, lord," Visimar said deeply, and his voice was a frightened thing behind the mask of furs, "many wonderful things have I seen, and much magic, in the years of my life, but never such wisdom, nor such victory as this. If my people disobey, they shall die by my own hand. I go!"

THE FIRES in the grass and in the *gangika* died out against the moat and the walls of Byoko, but the acrid fumes hovered low over the white walls, and the eye of the sun looked through them bloodily. The bear legion moved heavily and their swords were sluggish at the slaughter, but the red legions loosed from the reign of fear, ravened like starved wolves everywhere, and their women wielded torturous daggers. Till Wan Tengri wearied of the vengeance and deemed the spirit and the power of the Tinsunchi broken, and ordered the gates closed, and those who remained alive herded into the bloody temple of the Bear—and gave over the city to looting, with the proviso, repeated fiercely, that the half of all the riches be brought—to Christos! And Wan Tengri smiled in his beard, and counted the wealth that would be his. For, look, he had saved for Christos, the fifty thousand who would kneel in worship, and that was the pledge he had made!

So finally, when the bloody sun stood straight overhead, and the time was come, Wan Tengri strode with the small guard of the Bear which he maintained, through the slippery streets of Byoko and came finally to the palace of Aosoka.

Visimar had posted men of the red legion there, and they smote their shields and lifted their swords high in salute.

"Hail!" they boomed. "Hail, lord Amlairic, the Conqueror!"

But Wan Tengri went alone through the court of the pyramid, and to the brazen doors of the throne-room. He stood there, the bear-fur flung around his shoulders like a cloak, the horned helmet upon his head, his stained sword in his hand, but no other clothing save the muddy boots upon his feet, and the brief girdle of fringed wool which hung from his weapon belt. He was bone-weary, but exultation bore him up and there was swagger in the broad arch of his shoulders. His beard thrust forward fiercely, and he lifted his sword and struck three ringing blows upon the brazen door, so that the echo of it rang through the halls and came back to him.

With a slow groaning, the heavy doors swung apart, and Wan Tengri's eyes stabbed through the widening aperture and fixed on the golden throne of the bear. Across the steps of the low dais, the body of Aosoka sprawled bloodily, and there was a red ruff across his throat where a dagger had traced its fat way. And the doors swung wider, and Thanamund flung himself to his knees on his left, and bowed his head of long golden hair to the floor, and whispered, "Hail, Conqueror!"

And Tossa came slowly forward from the right, with her head bowed, and the weight of her honey hair aswing upon her shoulders, and she was clothed all in purest white, and no jewels were upon her arms or throat, or on her ankles. And she bowed to her knees and placed her lips upon the muddy boot of Prester John and afterward lifted her blue, limpid eyes to his face.

"Greetings to my lord," she whispered.

Wan Tengri drew her to her feet, and his hand stained her milk-white flesh with red, but she smiled at him and drew with it spirals around the firm roundness of her arms.

"The blood of thy enemies, lord," she said, "will ever be sweet in the nostrils of Tossa, thy slave!"

Wan Tengri laughed deeply, and set his heavy arms about Tossa's shoulders, and drew her close. "Thou art the wife for a conqueror," he cried. "Ho, there, Bourtai, show thy ugly monkey's face!"

A door, unseen until it opened, swung wide behind the throne of Aosoka, and Bourtai thrust out his grimacing face.

"Hail, Wan Tengri," he cried, in his cackling voice. "I never saw such looting!"

He skipped forward across the chamber, stepping disdainfully over the body of Aosoka, asprawl before the throne, and held out his dirty, claw hands, adroop with the glitter of strings of rubies and of diamonds; of pearls and precious baubles of gold. He chattered on in the Mongol tongue which they both knew, and which was strange in the ears of Tossa and of Thanamund, and Thanamund lifted his golden head and his narrowed blue eyes scanned the face of Bourtai, and Tossa moved within the circle of Wan Tengri's powerful arm.

"Have you secrets then from Tossa?" she asked softly.

But Wan Tengri was grinning into the beady malicious eyes of Bourtai, and watching the quick grimaces of the greedy mouth of Bourtai.

"It is a thing I do not understand, lord," Bourtai said fretfully. "Tossa saw Aosoka swallow this ruby of wisdom he wore upon his brows, and though I slit him like the fat hog he is, and winnowed all his vitals, I could not find it. Do you think it was a magic stone that was dissolved into his blood?"

"I think," said Wan Tengri with a grin, that believed his harsh tone, "that thou hast swallowed this same ruby to keep it thyself. How would it be if I slit your small monkey's belly—" He

reached out and jerked Bourtai close and laid his dagger's point against Bourtai's belly, and the eyes of Tossa burned, and behind his back, Thanamund gripped his own dagger and his gaze sought Tossa's. But she shook her head.

Bourtai's beady eyes blinked, and his pendulous lip loosened. "Nay, lord, I swear it! There are riches enough for us both!"

Wan Tengri laughed and thrust him away. "Keep thou the doors of the throne-room closed until I return. Thou, Thanamund, and Bourtai, keep watch. Tossa, mayhap in the wardrobe of this swollen Aosoka, somewhat deflated now, we will find robes to fit this bear's frame of mine and clothe me more fittingly for the throne of Aosoka. Do thou attend me!"

Tossa's cheeks flamed and her eyes sought the floor, and her voice was faint, "Yes, lord, my husband!"

Wan Tengri looked toward her, and roared out his deep laughter. "Why, yes, for all things there is time, since I rule here." And he laughed again. "Come, my wife, Tossa."

He was still bellowing out his deep laughter when the small hidden door shut heavily behind them, and Bourtai fell to wrangling with Thanamund over a pouch of jewels. But Thanamund's eyes blazed toward the door through which Tossa had gone.

"I am not sure," he said worriedly, "that I trust Tossa over-much. There is a certain power in these swaggering soldiers—"

Bourtai cackled. "Aye, but when that power is gone, nothing. For, look you, Thanamund, Tossa likes a man she can rule."

Thanamund spun like a striking snake. "Say you she rules me, foul thing!"

Bourtai backed away, yet still grinned. "Nay, did I say that? Yet it seems to me that Tossa has her way. But remember, there is to be no slaying of Wan Tengri! He has been a friend to me in his foolish, addle-pated way, and

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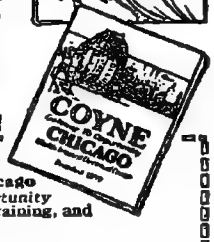

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while I am no man to let friendship stand in the way of filling my pouch, assissination is not necessary here so long as you let Tossa have her way." He frowned and looked in a worried way at the corpse of Aosoka. "But I would that I could find the ruby of wisdom—"

Soaked clean in the perfumed bath of Aosoka, and clad in silks that became him well, Wan Tengri took his ease upon Aosoka's divan, the while Tossa tended his hair and beard.

"Thou art a bloodthirsty wretch, Tossa," he said irritably. "Yet I cannot quarrel with thee, since my own interest is ever near thy heart."

Tossa's eyes were downcast where she knelt on the couch beside him, and her voice was soft. "I am only a woman, lord, and so cannot argue in man style. I was a poor beggar maid and you have made me bride to an emperor! Yet I am ambitious, and fearful, for you!"

Wan Tengri stirred on the couch, yet sank back again under her ministrations, accepted cooling juices from a golden cup she offered. "But to pursue and exterminate the last of the Tinsunchi! They are without heart! They will flee until the shores of the sea stop them!"

"Thou art all-wise, lord," murmured Tossa. "Yet it seems to me that conquered races have raised their heads again. There are the red Tokhari—"

"Ah, well, tomorrow or next week—"

"Nay, master, now!" Tossa quailed before the stab of his eyes. "Now, lord, it would be nothing for thy trained legions. Tomorrow, the Tinsunchi may remember some magic they have neglected!"

Wan Tengri snapped his blunt-fingers. "I care naught for their magic. I have fathomed and used it all!"

"Yet, once, lord, it laid thy head in the dust!"

Wan Tengri started to his feet, and Tossa cowered as under a lash, but beneath her brows her eyes watched him with a curious steadiness.

"Do you belittle my conquest, woman!" he thundered.

"Surely, lord, the words of thy slave are—"

"The words annoy me!"

"Then I shall rip out my tongue!" Tossa flicked her small dagger from her girdle and thrust out her tongue to its keen edge, but Wan Tengri took the knife from her hand and smiled down on her in rough affection, rumpled her golden hair.

"Art a very small tyrant," he rumbled, "but thy mind is keen. These Tinsunchi must be destroyed!"

A gleam of satisfaction flashed in Tossa's eyes, to die. "Aye, my lord," she cried. "I shall miss you! Not to spend one night in my arms before you go upon the trail of your enemies!"

"Why, as to that—"

"But I know how the blood of a conqueror drives him on! You cannot rest until they are destroyed!"

"A man has his trade!"

"And thine to conquer, my lord!" Tossa reached up her arms to the thick column of his throat. "Would that I could tread this road of conquest with thee! But it will be brief. Here, I will watch over thy throne, and guard thy privileges. Yet it is a weighty care to place upon my woman's shoulders."

Wan Tengri squeezed those shoulders between his great hands, and her face lifted, flushed with triumph, though the cause could not show in her pink and white flesh.

"To please thee, then, Tossa!" Wan Tengri said, and drew a slow breath into his weary body.

"Nay, lord, to please thyself, and make thy throne secure for for thy sons!"

Wan Tengri roared out his laughter. "For this particular batch of sons," he shouted. "Nay, lass, I mean not to offend thee. Thou are a worthy mother of kings. And since I cannot spend this night in thy arms—"

Visimar made some small protest at the order to assemble the legions for the pursuit. "How, lord, will you leave a throne so newly won?" he asked slowly. "A man must make sure of foundations."

Wan Tengri nodded, "I am sure, *anda,*" he said steadily. "Thyself, and thy own hundred shall guard the throne, and Tossa shall rule in my stead with the advice of thyself, and of my small wizard, Bourtai. But the blood of a conqueror drives me on. I cannot rest until my enemies are destroyed!"

Visimar glowered before him at the packed temple of the Bear, where the thousands of Tinsunchi gathered at Wan Tengri's orders, where the figure of the Bear had been toppled in ruins to the floor. "Thy enemies, lord, when a throne is beneath thee, are ever near to seek."

Wan Tengri whirled toward him. "What mean you, Visimar!" His tone was rough with menace, but Visimar squared his shoulders and his blue eyes met those of Wan Tengri fearlessly. "If I speak, lord, it is from my heart."

"There is a deal of this heart-talk going on," Wan Tengri rumbled. "Speak on!"

"There are those here who are neither of our race, nor of the Tinsunchi," Visimar began cautiously, and Wan Tengri heard a light step at his side, and Tossa moved into the circuit of his arm.

"Now, who could you mean, Lord Visimar?" Tossa asked softly, and the blue eyes she turned on him were direct and full of fire.

Wan Tengri looked down on her gently. "Nay, now, Tossa, it is a thing you must learn, not to obtrude in the affairs of men."

Tossa dropped her eyes. "Yes, lord, my king," she whispered, yet delayed to send a single direct glance at Visimar.

And Visimar, seeing how Wan Tengri's arm lay about the woman's shoulders and the smile in his eyes, drew in a

slow breath, and changed his thought while he spoke.

"I speak of the magicians, lord, *anda,*" he said.

"Kill them," Wan Tengri said carelessly. "Tossa, I leave you and Bourtai and Visimar to rule in my stead while I destroy my enemies. Visimar, for his bravery, and Bourtai for his wisdom, and thou, Tossa, for thy love and thy loyalty."

Tossa said: "Yes, lord, my king."

And Wan Tengri strode to the rim of what had been the bloody altar and commanded the captive Tinsunchi harshly, to bow their heads and bend their knees to Christos and Wan Tengri saw them waver and subside, and he grinned in his beard.

"There, Christos," he muttered, "my vow is fulfilled, and I make thee a new pledge. Help me, then, to other conquests, and other such lootings as this Byoko has yielded, and an entire continent shall bow the knee to thee! Stand by Prester John and I'll make thee the greatest god in all the world, nay, the only god in this world! It is a vow!"

Wan Tengri touched the bit of the True Cross at his throat, and it was a short while later that he took his leave of Tosso and Bourtai and Visimar in the throne-room—and stalked out to set himself at the head of his legions and march from the conquered city of Byoko, upon the trail of the fleeing Tinsunchi. He was scarce outside the city walls when Visimar staggered from the table at which he dined with Tossa and small, fierce Bourtai, while Thanamund hovered in the peripheral darkness, and Visimar cried out in a strangled voice and hurled at Tossa's head the golden cup from which he drank. But his eyesight was already failing, and it missed. And he fell, struggling with the death that was within his vitals, and Bourtai cackled shrilly.

"Now that is the way to serve enemies; Tossa," he cried. "We will be freer now to rule this city as seems best—for our pouches."

Tossa leaned toward him, smiling sweetly though fire was in her eyes, "*Our* pouches, Bourtai?" she asked.

And Bourtai, starting to his feet in sharp fear, heard a light step behind him and did not dodge in time, so that he fell under the stroke of Thanamund's dagger-hilt. And Thanamund knelt to slit his thin throat.

"Hold Thanamund, husband," said Tossa quickly. "When this great bumbling warrior, Prester John, returns to these walls, we may need Bourtai's shriveled carcass as a hostage. Till then, he can rot in the dungeons!" Tossa rose and set her hands upon the narrow stripling's shoulders of Thanamund, and smiled into his eyes, fondly, as a mother might.

"I have labored a long time, Thanamund, to set you on the throne," she said.

"It was my brains did it," Thanamund stirred under her hands.

"That is so," Tossa said, yet secretly smiled. "You sit upon the throne of Aosoka! Long and happily may you rule, my lord king! Our kinsmen, the Yueh-Chi, are on their way from the plains, and the gates will open to them at dawn. This handful of red dogs will die in their sleep, and then thou wilt be absolute, Thanamund, my lord king!"

Thanamund moved from beneath her hands, and his scowl was fierce. "You did this in your own way," he said harshly, "but I will be king, and I swear to you that if our first son has red hair, I will slit his throat in the cradle!"

He spat out the words between his teeth but Tossa laughed and pulled his blond boy's head down to her heart. And on the road of the Heaven-Bear, Wan Tengri strode at the head of his marching legions, and his eyes were on the darkening skies, and the bright wheeling of the constellations, and a

little he wondered which of those brilliant stars was his own. Surely, it was rising swiftly now! A conquerer, he! As he stared, a falling star scratched its brilliance across the heavens and for a moment, Wan Tengri was shaken. Then he laughed softly, and the *clang-clang* of sword on shield, beating out the rhythm of his conquest, made a sweet music in his ears. He began to hum through his nose—

X.

For panic-stricken, fleeing people, the Tinsunchi organized rapidly and well and many times Wan Tengri thought that Tossa had advised well that they be scoured from the earth. He followed them to the banks of a deep swift river, called Amur and he harassed them down that long, winding river to the Gulf of Tartary and it was there on the sands he fought his great battle that wiped out a half of all the forces of Tinsunchi so that the rest fled screaming into the sea.

But the wise women of Tinsunchi had constructed rafts and curious boats with a log that rode beside them on long booms so that the seas could not overturn them, and they fled toward the islands of Nippon across the sea. And the story goes that because of the treachery of Tossa, the women of the Tinsunchi lost their ascendancy and became as slaves; and that through many hundreds of years, the men of Nippon have feared and fought the Bear-That-Walks-Like-a-Man.

Standing on the bloodied sands, Wan Tengri watched them go, and there was a joy and a great happiness in his soul. At last, the long quest was ended and he could turn back to the white walls of Byoko. Many cities that had harbored the fugitives for a night or a month, had fallen under the sure assault of his veteran legions and he had quartered his men here and there about the land. For Wan Tengri was a conqueror—and he caused himself to be proclaimed under the name that came hard to the lips of the conquered. Pres-

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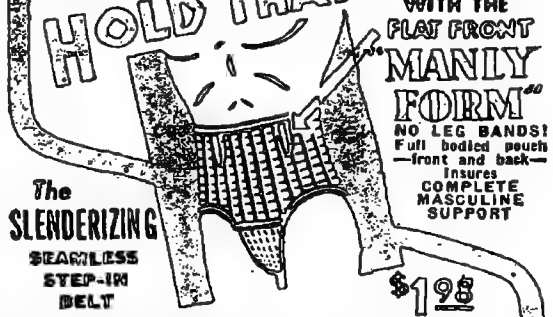

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ter John. And everywhere, as he had promised, the people must bow the knee to Christos—and yield their gold to the right arm of Christos, Prester John!

But as he marched back toward fair Byoko, in the sea of Buryat, he found the cities had revolted against him and thrown off the conqueror's yoke, and massacred the garrisons. They laid ambushes along the road so that Wan Tengri lost many men and won back at last to the blowing grasses of the sea of Buryat with a scant hundred left of all the brave warriors who had marched with him. Still a caravan of horses and camels moved with him, heavy-laden with the spoils of half a continent, and grimly Wan Tengri promised a reckoning with the rebellious cities!

Now, his eyes reached out into the mistiness for the heat toward where he knew Byoko waited, secure and secret behind its white walls; with Visimar to head the strong guard and Tossa to rule with Bourtai's wisdom. And probably, he would have to find some honor for that lad, Thanamund, who had opened the gate. A little Wan Tengri's lips, stern-drawn through conquest, relaxed beneath his fierce beard. Aye! He would be glad to return to his throne in Byoko.

So the caravan took the high road of the Heaven-Bear across the sea of Buryat and came, when the shadows of the night were drawing near, to the hill of the Bears. Before his burdened red legion, Wan Tengri rode lightly in the saddle and presently began to sing softly. It seemed to him an omen of happiness that he camped, this last night from his throne, upon the hill where he had struck the first blow of conquest. Yet he frowned a little when men with long, blond hair came to bow before him with greetings from Tossa; to say that on the morrow she would send a panoply worth the conqueror of half the world.

"I know not your faces, nor your coloring," Wan Tengri said to the men shortly. "Look to your loyalty!"

The men swore their fealty and they

prostrated themselves to kiss the dust where Wan Tengri had trod, and Wan Tengri's shoulders swaggered a little. These Easterners were slavish dogs. Show your teeth and they knocked their heads in the dust. If the mobs of Alexandria could see him now! So Wan Tengri sat apart in his silken tent and watched the long-haired men serve the legion; and did not notice when another of the blond men appeared out of the darkness and grass; nor that he presently whispered orders—orders from Tossa!

For this one night, Wan Tengri felt himself alone and desolate in this far Eastern world he had conquered. He waved aside the guard that ever accompanied him and went to the far pinnacle of the hill of Bears and gazed out over the sea of Buryat, where the mist was rising milky-white and gleaming beneath the moon. Presently, when he had rested a while, he would return to conquer these cities that had fallen once before him, and now had turned traitor to his dominance. They should know the wrath of Prester John! But now he was weary, and his riches were a heavy weight upon his shoulders.

Behind him, he heard the laughter and the songs of his legion. They were happy that tomorrow they would see home, though many had left their bones along the long trail to the sea and back again. Well, it was so the tale of conquest ran. Tomorrow, he would strut in full golden array, and he would be happy. But just tonight, he was lonely. Silence fell over his camp, and he thought that once a man cried out, living a battle over again in his dreams. But he heard nothing more, and the moon turned tired and pale and old, and dipped toward the mists of Buryat. And it was in that chill moment before the world turns toward morning that Wan Tengri heard, afar off, the swift, hard pounding of a horse that traveled fast along the road from Byoko! He lifted his great body stiffly from the stones to peer out along the pale white line of the road; and he could see nothing, but the urgency of those pounding hoofs was louder.

Wan Tengri swore under his breath. It was no more than another messenger from Tossa, he told himself, and yet alarm stirred within him. For it seemed to him that he could hear the mingled pounding of other hoofs in pursuit. Surely, now, nothing had happened in Byoko! Tossa could not be—fleeing! Wan Tengri rasped an oath, and went striding down over the rocks toward the sleeping camp, and he sent his great voice roaring before him, sounding the alarm.

"To arms, my brave ones!" he shouted. "To arms!"

He shouted, and his deep cry went lonely off over the sea of Buryat, and there was no answering stir of the camp. No guard echoed his shout; no drum and trumpet sounded the alert. Yet he could see the outstretched forms of his men about their dying fires!

Angrily, Wan Tengri repeated his shout, and he began to run down the steep slope—and bounded into the midst of the camp. He whirled his sword and struck with its flat the rump of a sleeping man, and the man's body slumped over on its face, but its head remained hideously grinning up at him in the dying light of the moon!

Fury raged through Wan Tengri's great body and he bounded about the camp in mad vengeance, but everywhere only the throat-slit bodies of his legion confronted him. Even the burdened beasts were slain—and the men with the long blond hair, the men who had kissed the ground on which he walked, had vanished into the thinness of the night!

In the midst of his murdered legion—drugged and murdered in their sleep, beyond a doubt—Wan Tengri stood, a frozen statue of grief. These men had

fought beside him, and well, and they had earned a better fate than this. Tomorrow, they would have been lords of Byoko, with wealth and slaves to do their bidding, but tonight stealthy death had slipped upon them with drawn dagger—and the frantic hoofbeats of the hard-driven horse hammered again into his consciousness.

Wan Tengri shook his great shoulders and, with a single gesture ripped off his silken robes. The red light of the fire, reaching upward, burned upon his thick-thewed body, and he hurled the silks from him. Long bounds took him to his tent and, sword in hand, he plunged among its silks, but no assassin lurked here. Great sobbing curses panted from Wan Tengri's teeth-locked jaws. A shirt of mail dropped over the naked arch of his shoulders, and he found his great bow and the full quivers of arrows; he found the helmet of gold with its *aurochs'* horns, and the ears of the bear wrought in gold upon it, and he slung his shield across his shoulders and bounded out into the rocks.

His FIERCE eyes combed the road. Now, surely, this was the work of the captive Tinsunchi, and it was Tossa that was fleeing toward him! He could see the fugitive horse, with a small dark figure perched on its back, and there was no mistake now about the heavy hammering of the pursuers. He could see the dark blur of the horsemen five hundred paces away upon the white road. And the leading horse swung from the road, and galloped up among the rocks, to tumble and fall there. And the dark, small figure leaped from its back and sprang among the rocks with the agility of a monkey, and a cracked small voice, thin with fear, reached out to Wan Tengri's ears!

"Wan Tengri! Master— O Prester John! It is I, Bourtai, come to save you! Awake, for treachery is at your door!"

Wan Tengri swore in wonder, and showed himself among the sheltering rocks. "This way, ape-face, and speak swiftly. What is this treachery?"

"Arouse your men!" Bourtai panted. "The hordes of the Yueh-Chi are upon us!"

Bourtai bounded upon the rocks and flung himself on his knees before Wan Tengri, and he clasped Wan Tengri's thighs and through his taut muscles the trembling of this miserable frightened man communicated itself to Wan Tengri's heart.

"Speak out," he said harshly. "What is this treachery? My men are all slain in their sleep!"

Bourtai moaned and crouched in a smaller heap at the feet of Wan Tengri. "Then, we are dead men, Wan Tengri! For you were scarce outside the city walls when Tossa poisoned Visimar, and threw me into a dungeon cell for hostage, and set Thanamund upon thy throne!"

Wan Tengri's heavy fist lifted, trembling, in the air. "Thou lie-est, dog!" he rasped.

Bourtai's monkey-face turned upward in the pale dying light of the moon and the shadows twisted it into a leer. "How, my lord?" he whispered. "Who slew thy red legion, unless it was the yellow-haired dogs of the Yueh-Chi? Her people, that she-devil's people, that she summoned to serve her and to slaughter the stout red guard you left behind!"

Wan Tengri's fist fell heavily as a log, and limply, to his side, and he stared out toward the unseen white walls of Byoko and glimpsed the swift blond horsemen of the Yueh-Chi. A great oath tore his throat.

"So she was false," he said thickly. "False. Why, that is not strange. I was ever a fool about women and I knew her so short a while—but thou, my comrade." A deep, ringing irony

came into his voice. "Thou, my other self! My stanch defender!"

Bourtai trembled and cringed away, yet his beady eyes held the direct gaze of Wan Tengri. "My wrists show the sores of dungeon chains," he whimpered. "Thy eyes shall see, and thy sword take vengeance—if these accursed Yueh-Chi do not slice thee to bits first! Lord, they are the kinsmen of the treacherous Tossa!"

Wan Tengri's eyes lifted fiercely toward the charging body of horse and they were no more than a hundred cubits away and coming fast. And Wan Tengri threw back his head and the laughter that poured from his throat was a fierce and terrible thing.

"Ho, kinsman of the blond hag!" he cried. "Take thou her my greeting!"

And the great bow bent almost to breaking under the wrench of the cord of tiger gut and a long arrow snored into the pale darkness—and in the forefront of the charge, two men who rode behind each other screamed and pitched, dying, to the earth. Wan Tengri sped more arrows. Some few of the horseman made the rocks and crouched to loose their feeble bows and Wan Tengri slew their horses with the last of the arrows and afterward leaped among them. The laughter pumped from his aching chest, and his sword was a curved and glittering death. One man's head leaped from his shoulders, and his streaming blond hair fell in two parts to the earth; and an-

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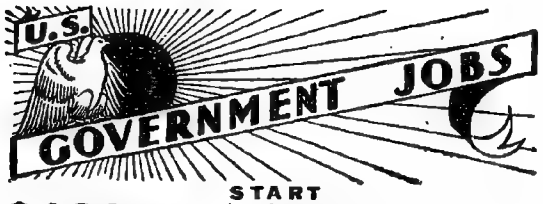

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other man Wan Tengri smote terribly across the belly, so that his keen blade delayed for a moment before it flashed on through the severed spine. There remained then, but one man of the score who had pursued Bourtai, alive to flee. He turned and fled screaming down among the rocks and Wan Tengri flung his dagger and took the man through an outstretched arm, and still the man fled. And Wan Tengri sent his sword glittering through the air, and the other wide-flung arm was severed at the wrist. And still the fool fled, screaming.

Wan Tengri was after him with great bounding leaps, and his fist knotted in the back of the man's cloak, and he wrenched him from his feet and slammed him flat down upon the hard dust of the road, so that his senses were knocked out of him. Then Wan Tengri knelt and did a curious thing. He sliced off the man's golden hair and used it to bind the handless stumps of his wrists, and afterward, he threw a helmet full of water into the man's face. And the man's eyes popped wide and he screamed in terror.

"Thy life is spared," Wan Tengri said heavily. "Only tell me one thing. Who rules in Byoko? Speak truth!"

The man's lips quavered and he stammered out awkward words in the language which Wan Tengri had spoken, the language of Tokhari.

"Lord," he whispered. "It is Tossa who rules with her husband, Thanamund."

Wan Tengri sucked in a great, slow breath. "And what of Visimar, and of Bourtai?"

The man's head rolled. "Lord, be not angry, but I know naught of those. Yet stay, there was a small wizard in a dungeon—"

"And of the Tokhari, the red-headed ones?"

"We slew them, lord, under the orders of Tossa," the man whispered. "In all Byoko, there is no red-headed one living save the red-haired son of Tossa,

the queen, whose name is Press-tai Wan."

Wan Tengri stared down at the helpless, mutilated man for a moment and then he tipped back his head and laughter roared from his great brazen throat. He helped the man to his feet and thrust him on the road toward Byoko.

"Go, fool," he ordered, "and take this word to Tossa, from Wan Tengri, her lord. From Prester John. Presently, I shall come and single-handed, tear down the walls of Byoko. And when that time comes, she had best give good account of her keeping of my son!"

THE MAN stumbled and twisted back a fearful face and, afterward he broke into a stumbling run upon the road to Byoko, closed now to Prester John. Within its strong walls, Tossa was queen and her kinsmen manned the walls—and kept the spoils of a rich city. But Wan Tengri, on the white road to Byoko, grinned and threw back his head and laughed again.

"Ho, she has her own torment with her, this Tossa," he chortled. "For Thanamund knows that this Press-tai Wan is my son, and that will be torment enough for the two of them. And the day will come when I will raze these walls!"

At his elbow, Bourtai said dryly, "Will you put a name on that day?"

Wan Tengri whirled on him. "Why, thou bag of monkey bones, you will not live to see it! I shall build a slow fire and roast thy shriveled flesh, and laugh while you howl."

Bourtai hunkered down in the dust, yet his sly eyes kept watch on Wan Tengri's face. "Master," he whined, "I did what could be done! I was thrown into a dungeon, and I brought thee word of treachery when I could escape."

Wan Tengri scowled. "More likely you plotted against me, small fool. Thy wizard's wisdom is not so great." He reached down and caught the thin mouse-colored hair of Bourtei from his

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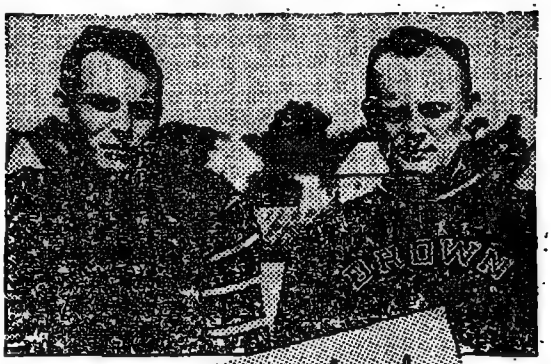

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ridged skull. "Confess, you plotted my death with Tossa!"

"Nay, lord—"

"Confess!"

Boutrai squealed. "I plotted not thy death, lord. I held out for the dungeon!"

Wan Tengri flung the shivering small man from him, and glowered toward him, yet after a while a secret smile worked on his hidden lips.

"Why, you are a treacherous small ape, Bourtai," he said softly, "and before I finish scraping thy bones, you will make a full confession. You sent Tossa to me."

"Did she not please you, lord?"

Wan Tengri let out the bottled laughter and picked Bourtai up by a shoulder and herded him over the rocks toward the road—but not the road toward Byoko.

"Why, a little I can forgive thee, wizard," he chuckled. "And I should miss thy small thieving ways. And it is plain that Christos is not yet ready for his kingdom in the east or he would have taken care to cut thy throat long ago."

"Master," whimpered Bourtai, "is there no rich loot in the camp upon the hill?"

"Not for thy filthy fingers," Wan Tengri growled, and there was the roughness of anger in his voice. "The men who won it, died there because of it. Let it be their bier—and besides, the thieving scoundrels who killed them cut the throats of all the caravan."

"Yet," whispered Boutrai, "we could carry some few jewels with us, master, on this road we travel. You will need them when you come to this third kingdom you are to conquer."

Wan Tengri's teeth showed in his beard and he struck a pouch at his belt. "I have enough for my needs, Bourtai, and as for thee, I care not if you starve—or beg! And we need to make haste, lest these same blond horsemen overtake us presently."

And they walked on, side by side, along the white road, and once more there was the grayness of dawn before them, and their faint shadows gathered under their feet. But Bourtai skipped a little ahead, to twist his grinning ape's face back on his shoulder.

"Master, did I do so ill?" he asked pleadingly. "For there was good fighting there in Byoko while it lasted; and thy magic is stronger, and the woman, Tossa, was a princess of the Yueh-Chi. And you said, lord, that you liked not princesses."

Wan Tengri grinned and stretched his legs so that Bourtai had to scamper to keep pace, and there was a lighter feeling in his breast than he had known in many moons. For there was all the world before him to conquer, and there was the prophecy. He jingled the bag of jewels at his waist, and his hand clapped the hilt of the curved sword at his belt.

"When I have conquered my third kingdom," he said cheerfully, "I shall raze the walls of Byoko and Turgohl and these long-haired princesses shall be slaves in my kitchen. And look you, Bourtai, I am not empty-handed, and I have learned some things. I have learned how to handle men in battle. I am a great strategist, a greater general than Alexander and Caesar, since I cannot only lead men to victory, but I can outfight any man in my army! I have learned many things and when next I conquer, I shall rule with a stern and a wise hand. Now," said Wan Tengri, "I am the conqueror."

He hummed through his nose and stretched out his stride, and presently frowned a little. "I think that Christos may have been a little angry that I gave him no share of the loot," he said. "I will know better about that, too, in the

future. It is an empty thing to have men kneel before thee. I know that."

Bourtai's smile was sly on his apish mouth, but there was something close to admiration in his small, greedy eyes; and as much as he could give any man his fealty, he gave it now to Wan Tengri.

"Why, sire," he said humbly, "thou art all-wise. You have learned great magic, and how to handle men, and how to propitiate the gods. But there is one thing still you needest to know."

"What, wry-faced ape?" glowered Wan Tengri. "Any small thing that thou canst tell me?"

And Bourtai's sour face twisted into a wry smile. "Why as to that, thou great hulk, I am no help. Still it is a thing a conqueror must know."

Wan Tengri caught him up by the nape of his neck. "Speak, apeling, ere I shake it out of you!"

"Easy, master. Easy," whined Bourtai, yet he danced ahead out of reach when Wan Tengri set him down. "Why it is a simple thing, master, for so great a man. You need learn now only one more thing, and it is a thing unknown through the ages. You must learn to rule and to read the mind of one woman."

Wan Tengri made mock of drawing his sword, and presently he laughed loudly and a little in irony, but it passed and he set his eyes on the far horizon that hid he knew not what, nor cared so that it gave him battles to fight, and men to rule and of course, a bit of gold to share with Christos.

Wan Tengri hummed tunelessly through his nose, and once he blew out a great breath, and shook his head, but brightened to the jingle of jewels in his pouch.

"And yet, Bourtai," he said. "I would have liked to see this red-headed son of mine, this Press-tai Wan."

AFTERWORD:

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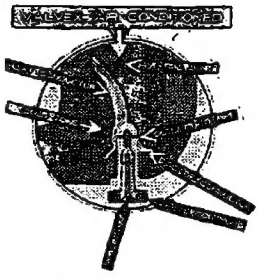

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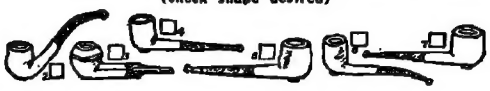

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charged the golden gauze that protected the throne of Aosoka; and the powers of the telescope. Yet, of that last I would say that the invention of the telescope did not lag anywhere very far behind the discovery of optics. And optics followed rapidly upon the spread of reading—which had been general through China more than three thousand years before Christ. Indeed, it is known that the Chinese made astronomical observations far exceeding in accuracy any others of their day and time; such as would not have been possible without telescopes. Spectacles were used in China long before their advent in the western world in the fourteenth century. There is a portrait of Cardinal Ugone in a fresco in a church at Treviso, in Italy, which was painted in 1352, which is the first known example in the western world. And it is a remarkable thing that this was in Italy, and less than a hundred years after the Polos made the first of their remarkable journeys to the court of Kublai Khan!

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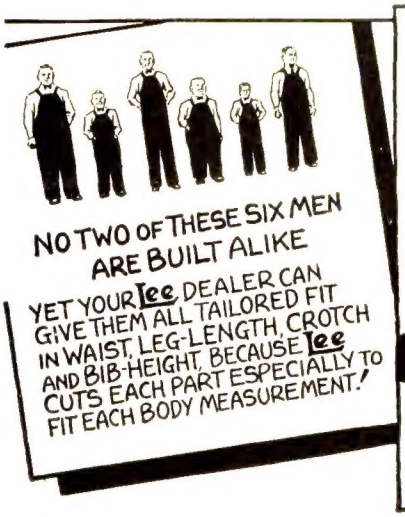

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